

What's In It For Us?

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When Bill Schulz was campaigning to be president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, he shared the following anecdote during one of his campaign addresses. It was about his father or grandfather or maybe his uncle. I may have this and other details not quite right, but here is how I recall the heart of this true story – and let's say it was about his grandfather.

His grandfather had been for many, many years the treasurer of his little church. (No term limits apparently...) And every year during all the years that he served as treasurer, when they closed the books, the budget of their small congregation balanced. It seemed almost to be a miracle.

But it wasn't a miracle. Only later, as I recall the tale, after Bill's grandfather had passed, did they discover that the budget balanced each year because if there was a shortfall, as there often was, he would quietly and anonymously make it up.

I am not offering this as a suggestion to our current treasurer – John will be pleased to know.

I am offering this because of another lesson the story holds.

Why did this good man meet the gap each year from his own pocket, a pocket that it must also be said was not particularly deep? It was not because of any potential embarrassment he might have felt as treasurer – if the church came up short at the end of the year, it wouldn't have been his fault, nor would anyone think it had been.

No, the answer is quite simple. He loved his church. And he had a generous heart.
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Churches, you know – and most of you have heard me say this before, and I said it in this year's Stewardship booklet, which many of you have seen by now – churches are themselves a kind of miracle, particularly in a free society such as ours. No one forces anyone else to go to church. (Well, maybe some pressure is applied by parents to children... but, even so, a time comes when parents give their children the same freedom they enjoy.)

And if churches are in general a kind of miracle, Unitarian Universalist congregations are if anything even more of a miracle than other varieties. No threat of hell nor enticement of salvation is proffered to encourage attendance, much less involvement on committees, fundraisers, classes, and on it goes. We come of our own free will to the free church. We participate and contribute in all kinds of ways of our own free will.

There are (I hardly need remind you – and perhaps I shouldn't!) other things you could be doing of a Sunday morning – and sometimes you do, I know that – simply doing nothing as a complete break from a busy week, reading the paper over a cup of tea or coffee, spending time with your family or friends.

Yet so often you are here. *We* are here together.

It *is* a kind of miracle. For us it is the miracle of Old Ship.

And of course this miracle, too, has no supernatural origin, at least none that I can detect. You know as well as I do, as well as Bill Schulz's grandfather knew, that it is simply the miracle of love and a generous heart.

We love this place, this building, this community. We love the ideals for which this building stands – freedom of conscience, democratic debate and conversation. We love the principles on which Unitarian Universalism is grounded – the inherent worth and dignity of each person, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, our striving for justice and peace, caring for the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

We love all this.

And we know that it is only sustained if we sustain it. However deep or not our pockets may be, this place, this community, this faith are only sustained if we sustain them.

We also know something else, whether we consciously think much about it or not. We know that living with an open heart of generosity is the way we would prefer to live. Love – a generous heart.

Here's another way of looking at it:

When we give to Old Ship – and though there are many ways in which we contribute to Old Ship, through time and creativity and volunteering, it is the financial contributions on which we focus at this time of year... - when we give to Old Ship, we might well and understandably ask ourselves:

“What's in it for us?”

And perfectly good answers would have to do with all the programs that we appreciate, that enrich our lives and nourish our souls: Sunday worship, lifelong learning, opportunities for social service and outreach, working together on issues of justice, peace, and sustainability, a community of interesting and challenging friends...

All perfectly good answers to the question, “What's in it for us?” when it comes to our choice to help sustain the Old Ship community.

But there is also this other kind of answer to the question. Because what's in it for us when we give as generously as we are able, maybe sometimes even more generously than we thought we could manage – what's in it for us is *a heart that is that much more open*. And this is how we want to live.

The church is of course not interested in breaking anyone's bank. Times are tough, no question about that, and they are tougher for some than for others. All the more reason for some of us (if we are able) to give a little more, since others of us may have to give a little less. We share our common wealth, in whatever measure we are able, to build the common good – the good of our values, our ideals, our principles, our desire to deepen and nourish our spiritual lives, our efforts to become better people to make a better world.

And I hardly have to remind you that ours is a troubled world. And I expect you would agree with me that in this world we need places like Old Ship more than ever, places from which ripples of life and love, of reason and tolerance, of dedication to peace and justice flow outwards for the good and welfare of all.

One more perspective: As you know by now, the Stewardship Pledge Campaign leaders and our Board of Trustees are taking a somewhat new approach this year. Even the name of what used to be called the annual canvass and more recently the annual pledge drive has changed. Stewardship. An invitation to each of us to look into our hearts and to look into our

pockets and to decide from a full and open heart what we can give in order to be good *stewards* – care takers – of the Old Ship Church in this generation for the benefit of this generation *and* for the benefit of future generations.

So, yes, a new approach we are calling stewardship. And it matters a lot whether or not this approach works! And it is up to us whether or not it works!

Is there a number that our leadership hopes we will reach together through our generous pledging? Of course. Do they want us to focus on that number? Well – a little – but not only. They want us to focus on our own reflections as to how much Old Ship means to us as a container for our ideals and values, hopes and dreams for the kind of world we want to live in. They want us to focus on our own reflections as to how generous we are able to be this year. They encourage us to remember how generosity opens the heart, and how we all, deep down, do want to live not just with an open-minded spirit, but with an open-hearted spirit.

Our leaders know and I know that “generosity” will translate into a different pledge for each of us depending on each of our circumstances. What is our income? What our various financial commitments? How active are we at Old Ship? But whatever our circumstances and whatever the nature and depth and breadth of our involvement at Old Ship, we are being encouraged to decide what pledge generosity translates to for us this year.

A final thought: Another of my colleagues, Rebecca Parker, president of my alma mater, Starr King School for Religious Leadership, has written an essay about giving to the church as a spiritual practice. She quotes a friend who affirms that in giving to his church, as he puts it, “I remember who I am.” And by this, as he elaborated, he meant that giving helps him to remember that he is a person whose life is about more than just providing for his personal and family needs (important thought that of course is), that he is “a person who has something to give... whose presence matters in the world... whose life has meaning because (he is) connected to and care(s) about many things larger than (himself) alone.”

So what’s in it for *us* when we give from an open heart to Old Ship and to other centers of healing and transformation? This reminder (a reminder that Bill Schulz’s grandfather didn’t need) of who we are, this connection to people and life and ideals larger than our individual selves.

What’s in it for us?

A beloved community of caring souls. A community rooted in ideals and principles that matter. An open heart.

Love.

So may it be.