

## **Pews and Pockets**

### **January 8, 2012**

This past week I was in Chicago for a few days, back at my old seminary, Meadville Lombard Theological School. I was there for a convocation of faculty, students, and the students' teaching pastors, or internship supervisors (as I am), sitting in on classes, and attending worship services, seminars, and discussion groups. Chris Jimmerson, as you all may recall, is the seminarian I am working with this year, and with whom you all will be working, as a teaching *congregation*, next year. He was there at the convocation, and it was great to watch him at work. It was also great to be back in Chicago, to feel the actual cold of winter, to see old faces and familiar colleagues.

But honestly, I had mixed feelings about being back at Meadville Lombard. As of this fall, my old school no longer resides on a nearly century old campus in Chicago's Hyde Park, where I was a residential student for three years. Instead it rents two floors from a very modern Jewish seminary, right downtown on Michigan Avenue, with a very impressive view of Lake Michigan. And though the student body is larger now than in my day, there are no residential students anymore. All the learning is done long distance and through intensive courses, as the students are there for now. As for the faculty, only one professor from my

time there still works at Meadville. The new full time faculty is much smaller now, with new philosophies, new pedagogies.

So I have to say, I was pretty resistant to all this change when I first showed up on Wednesday afternoon--just as some of us, having moved from our old location, may have felt or still at times may feel uneasy with the new faces and aesthetics and policies of this campus.

But my *attitude* began to change when in our first session together as a whole group, Dr. Lyssa Jenkins, an economist from Dallas and a seminarian, gave a quick, introductory presentation on economics. This presentation was the launching point for the theme of the next two days: exploring ethics, economy, and theology in uncertain times.

While I won't try to repeat back to you everything Dr. Jenkins shared with us, I will tell you she talked of political systems as moral systems because they exist to manage values, and of economic systems as amoral systems, because they exist to manage resources. In that context, Dr. Jenkins talked about economic trends in the 20th and 21st centuries, and she argued that democracy--our political system; our system of values--has been overwhelmed by what Robert Reich calls supercapitalism, our current economic system. And thus we, being participants in both, are in conflict with *ourselves*. Specifically, we as citizens are in conflict with ourselves as consumers.

After Dr. Jenkins finished her presentation, a couple of other people spoke, and then finally we went back to our hotels for the night, so we could turn around the next day and explore more about the intersections of economy, ethics, and theology as a community. It was a rich, tiring, stimulating time.

By Friday night, I was flying back home to Austin with new ideas, new visions, and new passion. And I came back with new questions: Looking at *our* current situation at Wildflower Church, in which our membership increased by about 25% in 2011, while our budget *decreased* by about the same amount, are we as *citizens* of this congregation in conflict with ourselves as *consumers* of this congregation? What does it mean that our pews are filling, while our pockets carry in them a good bit less funding for our congregation's operating budget? Is our *decreased giving* a reflection of the financial strains of the many? Is our *increased membership* a symbol of an increased *need* for people to find sanctuary from the instability, economic and otherwise, of the wider world? And, again, are the two trends we're seeing at Wildflower--more people, less money--in conflict with one another?

Well, conflict's not a topic or exercise most people are eager to jump into. But as I've said before, it helps to remember that the original Latin meaning of the word *conflict* simply means to strike together. Therefore we know, intellectually at least, that conflict is in itself a neutral concept. It's

neither good nor bad. We can either strike together a match and the side of matchbox to light a chalice, or we can do so to light a forest fire. Let's assume this morning that this exploration of membership and budget, of pews and pockets, is a holy exploration, one worthy of the flame of this chalice.

Now, going back to my couple of days in Chicago, I want to bring forth another couple of ideas that were discussed there, to bring into *this* exploration as tools. In a class for first year seminarians, Dr. Mark Hicks presented several errors of dominant tradition thinking, including faulty generalizations and partial knowledge. Faulty generalizations, to paraphrase Dr. Hicks, are when we take the experience of one person or one group of people, and universalize it. For instance, hypothetically, "I was able to increase my pledge, so, so should everyone else be able to." Partial knowledge is the experience of relying upon and privileging certain knowledge that is not fully informed. It works for the part, but not for the whole. For instance, in the reading we heard Lois share about some congregations' negative attitudes towards the Unitarian Universalist Association, the fears that the UUA will endanger or negate congregational polity appears, says the Commission on Appraisal, "primarily among the many Unitarian Universalists who are *not familiar* with denominational affairs." Does that make sense to you? Another, slightly older, example: the Hebrews fleeing Egypt only had partial knowledge when they were tempted

to turn back to Egypt, rather than journey forward into the unknown. Fortunately, rather than turn back in fear, they chose to move forward in faith, into the mystery, and eventually to manna from heaven, which nourished them on their journey to the promised land.

Because I only have partial knowledge, which could therefore lead me to make faulty generalizations, about why we fell so far short of our goals for the 2012 operating budget, I could turn back toward fear as well. I could turn to anxiety, or blame, or shame. But I only know some stories that shape how we got here today. And to run with them alone would invalidate the stories yet untold. It's my hope that the house meetings after the service today will help us as a community to share our stories in more depth, as we are comfortable, so that we can more clearly understand the needs of our congregation's members and families. Of course, that means we need you to attend.

For now, here, I don't want to try to make any conclusions about why we are where we are. I don't want to chastise anyone for not pledging more, nor do I want to encourage us to be satisfied with our giving, blaming it all on the economy somewhere "out there," because I just don't have enough information. Instead, I want to ask some more questions, which I invite you to meditate upon as you hear them. I invite you, too, to reflect upon these questions with your hearts as well as your minds.

What role did money and finances play your childhood? What assumptions were you raised to have about money? What of that early relationship with money and finances and of those assumptions have you carried with you into your adulthood? Have they been helpful, or detrimental? Is your relationship with money today easy? Indifferent? Challenging? How does your relationship with money influence your *daily* life? How does it affect your relationships with friends and family? How does your relationship with money shape your relationship with this congregation? How do you acknowledge, how do you reconcile with, the myriad different stories of, and relationships with money existing in this one shared community? (SILENCE...)

These kinds of questions were asked of me and the other participants at my old seminary this past week. And while we meditated on our own answers, I found myself thinking about my parents--my mother coming from a wealthy family, though they had lost much of their money during the Depression, while keeping the values that came with it; my father, who came from a mill town in Massachusetts, who himself worked at a printing press to support my mother and their five children. I thought about how, when my dad died, I was able to go to private school with the social security money I received, though we were not nearly as well off as most of my classmates, and that showed in the clothes I wore, the car we drove, the houses we lived in, the number of times we moved, so on and so forth.

We didn't go to church when I was a child, so I never learned about tithing, or giving as generously as I could to a congregation. I watched my mom struggle to pay as generously as she could for my tuition, and that was about it. Today, in that tradition, much of my "tithing" still goes to student loans that I later accumulated in life. It wasn't until a couple of years into attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation as an adult, that I began to actually *want* to contribute some of my own earnings to a cause greater than just my own life. And I've been doing so ever since, in various ebbs and flows, as I am able.

Because, while I do like being able to buy a new pair of shoes on occasion, or books (greedy for books I am), there is a very different feeling, a kind of liberation, when I am able to spend my money not just as a consumer, but as a citizen. At our congregational meeting in December, in which we voted on our short-fallen budget, we heard a powerful testimony to that kind of citizenship from a Wildflower member who spoke about her family choosing to forgo soft drinks because that was the only way they were going to be able to pledge and make a financial contribution to the congregation this year. We have seen that kind of citizenship since that day of the congregational meeting, with several individuals and families increasing their pledges in response to the budget shortfall.

Still, there is little less comfortable or comforting on a Sunday morning than hearing someone talking from the pulpit about how great it is

others are giving, when you just can't. A person wonders, does this congregation just want me for me money? Am I not valuable if I can't give as much as others? Doesn't anyone care that I just lost my job? Don't these people know I have a mountain of medical bills? There is little comfort indeed, sitting alone with all of these questions, doubts, fears.

But that's just it. We are not alone. These pews are filled with loving, compassionate, caring people, willing to walk and *talk* into the unknown with one another, willing to learn, willing to teach, willing to reach out, willing to be transformed. And we are called to be recipients of such abundant manna. For just as a Unitarian Universalist congregation cannot do its best work in isolation, but is called to exist in interdependence with other Unitarian Universalist congregations all around the country, even the world, really, an individual living in community within a congregation cannot sit in the pews in isolation.

Think about all we intentionally do together in this hour we share. We step out of our hustling paces of the other six days of the week to share in Sabbath, as Moses calls his people to do. We greet one another. We sing. We pray. We call out the names of those we carry with us in our hearts. Sometimes, as in last Sunday's beautiful service, in which we heard stories, vulnerable stories, of birth, love, and death, we cry together.

This is what Meadville Lombard professor Mike Hogue might call the *gospel* of vulnerability. The good news of being able and willing to share

our woundedness with one another. And out of that, our beauty. Without stopping to recognize both our woundedness and our beauty, we scurry ever onward, looking for something new, something just out of reach, to coat over our woundedness. But, as Walter Brueggemann says, “People who think their lives consist of struggling to get more and more can never slow down because they won’t ever have enough.”

We need this space and time to be a holy space and time. We need to remember that that is why our pews are filling with new faces, new stories. People are seeking Sabbath. They, you, are seeking Sabbath in beloved community, where you can be known, and know others.

And as we continue to settle into this new home, just as my old seminary settles into its new home; as our membership grows, just as my old seminary’s student body grows, we need to ask ourselves how we can reconcile our community’s great needs with our economic times’ great struggles. Are we living in faith, nourished by manna? Are we, fearful of losing our own share, hoarding our bread, preferring it go sour over sharing it with others? How do we balance our roles as citizens with our roles as consumers?

We can begin by being in conversation with one another. Listening, sharing, building bridges of understanding between our own stories and the stories of those sitting with us. Making room for one another in these pews,

we are called also to make room for the questions, and the multitude of answers, about money's role in our lives.

We do so not only for our own congregation, but for our faith that we share with people near and far. For our well being exists within an interdependent web of congregations throughout the country and the world. One of those congregations, some day, will be ministered to by the seminarian we are now just beginning to work with here at Wildflower Church. Several of those congregations, I hope, will some day be home to the children we are now raising here at Wildflower Church. How will our conversations today influence the conversations and the communities of our faith tomorrow?

Let us enter into these questions in the spirit of love, and in the spirit of understanding that "deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse." In so doing, let us live into our religion, remembering "we have religion when we have done all we can, and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves."

Amen.

#1014 Standing on the Side of Love