

## GIVING BACK IN DIFFICULT TIMES

A Sermon by Rev. Dr Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

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Let me begin with a story about a house painter named Jock Mahoney. Now Jock was very interested in making a penny whenever he could, so he would often thin down paint to make it go a wee bit further. He got away with this trick for some time.

One day the local Baptist congregation decided to do a painting job on their large church building. Jock put in a bid and, because his price was so low, he got the job. And so he went about the task of setting up the ladders and scaffolds and buying the paint and, yes, I'm sorry to say, thinning it down with turpentine.

Well, Jock was up on the scaffolding, painting away, the job nearly completed when suddenly there was a horrendous clap of thunder and the sky opened, the rain poured down, washing the thinned paint from all over the church. Suddenly a mighty gust of wind knocked Jock clear off the scaffold, landing him dazed but apparently not injured in the church cemetery, surrounded by gravestones and by telltale puddles of his thinned and useless paint.

Jock was no fool. He knew this was a judgment from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: "Oh God, forgive me! What should I do?" And from the sky, a mighty voice answered: "**Repaint! Repaint! . . . And thin no more!**"

During the past several months, many of us have been confronted with the folly of the Jock Mahoneys of our time, who have cut corners, deceiving others and often themselves in order to maximize their personal gain. Now the storm has arrived, and none of us can escape it. Everyone feels vulnerable. Some of us feel vulnerable about our future financial security, but there are many others whose vulnerability is an **immediate reality**—who face wrenching priority decisions about making mortgage or rent payments, providing food for their families, paying for medications—constantly worried about the possibility that a single new financial demand could force them into bankruptcy. Bankruptcy is “the other side of capitalism, which is really good at rewarding the winners, but doesn't tell us what to do about the losers.” [Daniel McGinn quoting a former student of Elizabeth Warren, chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel, *Newsweek*, 4/20/2009, p. 34] For millions of our fellow citizens, the American dream has turned into a nightmare.

The current economic crisis and our response to it represent for me a difficult but necessary opportunity for **values clarification**. What is of primary importance to each of us? When push comes to shove, what commands our deepest loyalties and commitments? How do we balance self-interest with concern for others? Our economic crisis has taken a particularly heavy toll among charitable organizations, including churches. The First Unitarian Church of Portland (OR) recently announced that, because of a budget shortfall, the church would cease operations and not pay its staff for the entire month of July.

What about our Fellowship in these difficult times? I am pleased to report that our members have maintained their pledge commitments for the current year at a remarkable rate. Barring a major unforeseen expense, we will once again be able to finish our budget year in the black. One of the reasons we can balance our budget year after year is our **frugality**. In point of fact, our Fellowship's cost per member is about one-half (53%) the average for all UU congregations, and more than 40% less than comparably-sized and –staffed UU congregations in Virginia. Cheap thrills!

The main reason for our cost effectiveness is the fact that we have deliberately made decisions that avoid heavy debt. Instead of buying or building a new facility, we decided to expand and improve our existing facility here on Pine Avenue. We decided not to spend an additional \$40,000 on air-conditioning. Volunteers from within the Fellowship completed much of the interior finish work at no additional cost. As a result of these prudent decisions, we will need to borrow only about \$50,000 for our Fellowship Hall improvement project, with minimal increases in our operating costs. By way of comparison, one of our sister congregations here in Virginia recently completed an expansion project that has saddled them with a debt of about \$900,000 along with steep increases in their annual operating costs. I think we are entitled to think of ourselves as a lean, green UU machine!

Yet there are challenges we must face together as we move forward. In my view, this has been a year of recovery from the demands of our building improvement project. Some of our most dedicated members—especially those who were heavily involved in the building project—are taking a well-deserved break from leadership positions. Some of the most generous financial contributors to our building campaign have had to keep their pledges for our operating budget at the same level as last year. Our Finance Committee has designed a budget for next year with a bottom line that is nearly identical to this year's budget. We will continue our tradition of wise and prudent spending.

That said, I believe there are steps we can and must take in order to achieve our mission as a progressive faith community in a conservative area. In describing these steps, I hope to challenge you—even at the risk of making you uncomfortable. With the completion of our building expansion, we have entered a new critical period in the history of our Fellowship. We need to nurture the next generation of leaders. We need support in both time and money from those who have recently joined our Fellowship. We need to revitalize our religious education program for both adults and young people. And we need to deepen our involvement with the local community. In short, we need a re-awakening.

We are an incredibly generous congregation, and our reputation has won us countless admirers in the local community. Just this past week during the meeting of the Hospice Advisory Board, the treasurer took time to thank our Fellowship for our contribution of more than eleven hundred dollars to the fund that supports care in the new Shenandoah House for terminally ill patients who otherwise could not afford it. She asked how we managed to collect this amount from such a small congregation. I answered that once a month we take a collection and just give it all away to a worthy cause. The other board members looked at me as if I was a minister from Mars.

What I didn't say is that this is the **only** offering we collect each month. As far as I know, we are the only UU congregation in Virginia that doesn't take an offering every Sunday. This is an important part of our Fellowship's history and culture, **but** it also puts additional pressure on our members' willingness to provide financial support through their annual pledges. I hope we can continue this practice, but we may need to begin taking a weekly collection if our pledge campaign falls short of its goal.

Today our focus is on pledging our financial resources. But there is another form of pledging that is equally important to the life of our Fellowship: **the commitment of your precious time**. For busy people, time is often more precious than money. Let me suggest a couple of ways that you might contribute your precious time to our Fellowship—especially if your financial resources are limited. One way is by participating in our religious education program for children and youth. Yesterday I spent a couple of hours meeting with two of our young people who are eligible to become associate members. My conversation with them reminded me how fortunate we are to have such thoughtful and compassionate young people in our midst. It also reminded me how important it is that we nurture their spirits as they look forward to the future. We should all be grateful to the adults in our Fellowship who have donated their time to helping these young people blossom and mature.

Another significant part of our shared life as a Fellowship is our Caring Network. This year—more than any other year in memory—our Caring Network has been called upon to provide extended support and assistance to several different families in our Fellowship. Their gratitude for our members' support has reminded all of us that we are a caring community, committed to helping one another through the difficult times in our life. I would like to recognize in particular **Diane Ganiere**, who has given generously of her time in support of Virginia Edwards and Phil and Mary Ernst. Diane also exemplifies how caring for one another is a mutual process, as she now faces the declining health of her parents. As one of my favorite readings from our hymnbook puts it, "We need each other." In a few weeks we will ask our members for your commitments in support of our Caring Network.

As I reflect on my experience here as the minister of this Fellowship, I am filled with gratitude for everything that we have accomplished during the past twelve years. But I am also concerned about the future of our Fellowship. I trust that you will hold that future gently, firmly, and generously in your hands. In the words of Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one, but still I am one.

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.