



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

You Are What You Love

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As I said earlier in the service, this is a sermon about money. Money is not a sexy topic these days, but the truth is that religious liberals in particular hate talking about money, period. You may have heard this comparison before: that talking about money is to UUs what talking about sex is to Baptists. This truism is well supported by the fact that parents can attend a wonderful educational event later today called "How to talk to your kids about sex."

I'm no expert when it comes to money. I've never had a lot of it, and when I do have it, I tend to spend it on the ephemeral – stuff like travel and eating out and entertainment. It's only in recent years that my annual voluntary giving reached four digits. At this time, most of our giving is to the church, to ACLU, to the UU Legislative Ministry, and to public radio and television.

While I feel good about our increasing generosity year by year, I would still only give myself about a C when it comes to managing money. So what could I say to you about money that would hold any weight? What I have to offer to you today is what I've learned in exploring the matter of money in my own life. Maybe you're not that great with money either. Maybe we can all learn something together here.

As we all know, it's a time of anxiety in our country. I learn about people who are out of work regularly. People tell me the worst thing about being unemployed is all the restless time you have on your hands, day after day. Time to feel anxious. But also time to think creatively, if you can bear to push yourself in this direction.

That brings up the main question I want to talk about today: how can we take care of ourselves the best way possible in these times of uncertainty? How do we *adapt*? It has to do with staying focused on what matters the most to us, and doing all we can to keep nurturing our sources of wholeness. How do we know what those sources of wholeness are? We're grounded enough to know that life isn't just about what we do for a living - most of us know that we can't ultimately define ourselves by the status of our career. But what is this life about?

For me, life is about loving our selves, our lives, and others, in that order. It has to be in that order because you can't authentically love others unless you love yourself. The life force of nature actually seems to be hard-wired this way. You may remember the Meryl Streep and Nicholas Cage movie several years back, called *Adaptation*. It's a strange movie about rare orchids and mid-life crises. The character who plays the orchid expert and thief, John Laroche, explains the way nature designed pollination to take place between insects and orchids. He says,

"... what's so wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. A certain orchid looks exactly like a certain insect so the insect is drawn to this flower that's double it's soul mate, and wants nothing more than to make love to it. And after, the insect flies off and spots another soul mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance, the world lives but it does - by simply doing what they're designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense, they show us how to live, how the only barometer you have is your heart. How, when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way."

The metaphor here suggests that nature has designed each being to be attracted to itself to ensure attraction to others. So what we are drawn to in life is a reflection of the beauty we see or know about in our own kind. The more beauty we see in ourselves, the more beauty we can find in the world. The more we love ourselves, the better we are able to love others. When we deny that we are beautiful, the world becomes colorless as well.

This concept of life can be applied to the lives of institutions as well. People are drawn to institutions that reflect their own qualities. A healthy church attracts healthy people. We love the qualities in a church that we love in ourselves, qualities such as compassion, openness, courage, honesty, a willingness to explore the aspects of life that are difficult. We

support the life of a church because it reflects what is most important to us in our own lives. We choose to support those institutions that we think are a positive presence in the world - institutions that function in the community as we ourselves wish to but that no individual alone could.

When you look at the state of the world now, supporting the non-profit organizations, whether it's churches or social service agencies, is one of the best statements of hope you can make. You're saying that you believe in a better future, that you believe in people finding comfort in caring for each other. You're saying that, despite the uncertainty and anxiety, that this is what really matters - that people continue to have caring institutions with which to associate.

It's the churches and non-profits - our grassroots institutions - that represent a woven tapestry of faith and hope. These support networks are what we need to feel like we can count on wrapping around ourselves like a blanket when we need to at any given time in the future, or even right now. Personally, I don't have a lot of faith in our congressional leadership right now, state or federal, but I do have faith in the people I think of as, closer to home - people who I see invested in their local communities, either with their time or their resources. While the care of our leaders can seem remote, ineffectual, or just plain too slow, I can see and feel the care of the members of my local community. WE care about each other.

But all this goes beyond the importance of supporting this beloved congregation. Everyone here already understands why that's important. What I want you to leave with here today is thinking about better ways to take care of yourself in uncertain times. At one point in the film *Adaption*, Susan Orlean, the character who plays a writer, says, "I suppose I do have one un-embarrassed passion. I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately." Do you know what you love passionately? Do you really? Because if you do, that means you are loving yourself well - if you know this, you can get through times of anxiety, you can remember what's most important in life. If you care about something passionately, you don't forget it and it keeps your life focused.

So let me make the unembarrassed suggestion here, that this church is worthy of being loved passionately! OR, let me suggest that this church is the place *where* you can discover what you do love passionately, and how knowing this with certainty can change your life. To know what it means to love with passion is to find the freedom of heart to love passionately. But anxiety and fear are great deterrents to the flow of love - just look at how it affects the dynamics of family relationships; emotional violence can be devastating. It is an institution like Neighborhood Church where we are reminded that we can't allow anxieties to interrupt the flow of our love and our passion. Whether it's in the form of your time or your treasure, this church will help remind you that your love should flow freely toward what really matters. We will tell you time and again to figure out what you love and to love it well. And, to let yourself be the first thing you love, for doing so will lead you to support the institutions that are good for you and good for others.

Later on in the film the character Susan Orlean comments, "there are too many ideas and things and people, too many directions to go. I was starting to believe that the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size." This is an argument for simplicity, but it's also saying that there are really only a very few things in life that you can love passionately. When we prioritize just a few things to love with all our strength, it actually helps make life more manageable in a world that can seem overwhelming.

I know some young people who could really find some solace in this idea. So many haven't heard the call yet in regards to what to DO with our lives. Vocation comes from the Latin verb, *vocare*, to call. Therefore, ministry is not the only profession one has to be 'called' to. All of us have a call to something particular in life, something particular to who we are, to what our gifts and talents are, to what are passions are. I keep thinking of that image of the insect bee-lining for its flower. What is your flower? If you are a bee, what is the flower you are drawn to that, once spotted, you can't let anything get in your way? We can hear this call most clearly when we let ourselves be certain about what we love most. If this is a time when you are discerning what you are called to do, no matter what your age is, it's no time to be modest and humble. That comes later, when the steady paychecks are coming in.

Yes, back to money. I think all of us can probably remember a time when we spent a lot of money on something and later on, we didn't feel good about it. But have you ever looked back on the money spent on a charitable donation

and felt bad about that? It's taken me a while to learn this, but giving to the causes I believe in feels great. It helps me to feel good about myself; it's actually good for my own sense of well-being.

This canvass season, when you think about what you want to give to the church, think about the amount that later on you can feel good about. Don't give until it hurts; give 'til it feels good! Or until it feels right.

The climax of *Adaptation* is the line one twin brother says to another toward the end of the film. The bizarre twists and turns of the film have led them to being fugitives in an alligator-infested swamp in Florida. Charlie Kaufman is a miserably panicked and self-berating screenwriter. They are hiding behind a felled tree in the dark when his twin says to him, "**you are what you love, not what loves you.** That's what I decided a long time ago." You are what you love, not what loves you. I love that line, and I think it's true. Think about it: you are defined in a really lovely way by what you love and support. With the economy suffering the way it is, this becomes more important than ever.

It is so easy to be seduced by our culture into thinking that we can only know who we are through the perceptions of others. If people think you have the right job, the right clothes, the right body, and you think you are loved because of these things, then who are you living for? If you don't have the money for these things, how can you be loved?

Now, I'm going to use a word that may be a bit risque for some of you, so I thank you for indulging me. I have a friend who just had a boob job. I got an email from her, "I got boobs," as though she bought a new car. She was already an attractive woman, but has had a notoriously difficult time meeting men. She thinks this will turn her luck around. But it seems like if she put her energy into loving what she loves, that love could more easily find her. She seems to be defining her self worth by what she can attract. How will she ever find a love that's good for her this way?

All of us are susceptible to being seduced by enhancing our self worth through material means. It's part of being American. But the purpose of good religion is to save us from this illusion. It's to remind us that we are what we love, not what loves us. If we are what we love, and we love this church, then we are the church, and we love it well because we know that caring for the things we love is the freest and most healthy way to live.

So whatever reason you decide to give generously to the church this year, just keep this in mind: you are the church - it is a reflection of what we collectively hold most sacred. It represents the hope we have for the future. It represents the faith we have now in the high standards of justice we seek, faith in the freedom of the unencumbered search for truth, and faith in the deep caring we have for one another. Let this be what you love.

I love that image of bees and insects teaching us about life. They see this flower that looks like what they love, and "bzzzzzzzzzz," they go for it and they find it and life gets a jump-start.

Can you see it? You find what you love in yourself. You find that expressed and supported by an institution - like, this church. You set your sights on it, you let nothing get in your way, you go for it.

"Bzzzzzzzzzz . . ."