



Towards a Culture of Abundance

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The Problem

In reflecting upon how Unitarian Universalists might nurture a culture of abundance, it would be tempting for me to note that our Canadian members support their congregations at levels that compare quite favourably with those of the major Protestant denominations in Canada. But to do so, I would need to ignore the fact that our congregations are much smaller, on average, so that resources are scarce even when individuals are generous. I could point out that Western Canada District stands alone among UUA districts in that each and every one of its congregations has honoured its full denominational assessment throughout this decade. But to do so would suggest unsurpassed generosity when the explanation might be attributed more accurately to our compliant Canadian temperament. (We may *complain* when paying our taxes, but it wouldn't occur to most of us to withhold them!) I could relate stories about congregations that went the extra mile in raising money or recruiting volunteers, but these stories would likely focus more on mechanics than mission. Besides, abundance is more a quality than a quantity.

At a time when self-help guides have never been more popular, Unitarian Universalists, like other North Americans, have come to believe in *salvation by technique* rather than salvation by character. The trouble is that cultivating new and better techniques will not necessarily move us towards a culture of abundance. What we seem to need is a wholesale change in attitude.

In seeking to nurture a culture of abundance among Unitarian Universalists, we must first acknowledge that most of our congregations are actually characterized by a

culture of scarcity. Amidst competing demands for our resources, Unitarian Universalists seem inclined to view time and money as commodities in short supply. Several factors influence this sense of scarcity:

Firstly, studies of charitable giving in Canada routinely suggest that the very occupational groups from which we draw the largest proportion of our membership – education, public service, the helping professions – are the least generous contributors to religious and other charitable organizations. One of the explanations advanced for this phenomenon is that, while these vocations are generously compensated (comparatively speaking) the accumulated wealth of those so employed is rather modest. In short, their privileged position is more akin to a tenancy than an ownership – and this leads to more measured, even frugal charitable giving.

Secondly, despite our facility with the language of church size dynamics, ours is predominantly a denomination of small congregations (many of which have mid-size pretensions). Some authorities in the field of small congregations have taken to defining the small church as one with limited resources rather than one with a small membership. (While there is a *general* correlation between these two factors, there is not a *necessary* correlation.) When small congregations constitute a critical mass within a denomination, there is bound to be an impact on the overall culture. Even larger congregations are affected by this prevailing culture, sometimes operating out of an *attitude* of smallness despite their relative size.

Thirdly, in some ways, the culture of scarcity masks the culture of convenience and entitlement that lies at the heart of North American consumerism. This culture, which is pervasive, tends to commodify spirituality as just one among many consumer goods available for human enjoyment. It encourages people to think of golf or shopping as fit substitutes for worship. It markets self-esteem in place of human worth and dignity. And it conditions us to understand abundance as something that is measured by how much one *gets to keep* rather than how much one *has to give*. It is unreasonable to think that our congregations should somehow be immune to this culture ... and the bargain-hunting mentality that it encourages. Congregations that cater to the demand for immediate comfort and gratification will likely never be characterized by a culture of abundance, as the longing for such fleeting satisfactions is insatiable.

Of course, there are exceptions to each of these generalizations (and any others we might make) which leads to another significant factor influencing this culture of scarcity – specifically, our capacity for identifying exceptions to explain away our behaviour! Sophistry is first among the deadly sins of religious liberals. Nowhere is this more evident than in matters of money.

The Possibility

Unitarian Universalist congregations are often described as communities of memory and hope. If comfort and entitlement underlie a culture of scarcity, then may we not suppose that honouring memory and empowering hope would encourage a culture of abundance?

The challenge before us, in moving from an attitude of scarcity to one of abundance, is to kindle a love of our heritage while inspiring a hopeful vision, thereby moving Unitarian Universalists beyond their apparent preoccupation with present comfort and convenience. Most of us fail to appreciate the sacrifices of past generations who have bequeathed to us legacies of spiritual insight and prophetic witness, along with the buildings and endowment funds that remain as a kind of fossil evidence of our religious ancestors' devotion to their faith. In his parting words to the field staff at the time of his retirement in 1988, the late Russell Lockwood noted that the institutional memory in most of our congregations is only about five years long. "What have you done for us lately?" is the common refrain in congregations that are short on memory but long on entitlement. One consequence of our institutional amnesia is that many Unitarian Universalists are uncertain about where our liberal religious movement is headed and whether or not it even matters. In short, our memory lacks depth and our hopes lack grandeur.

The most common situation where we can observe the motivating power of memory and hope is when a congregation undertakes a building project. While congregations may launch into a building program on the basis of current need, few make it successfully to the end without having generated an increased appreciation of their heritage and a renewed sense of hope and purpose. When this happens, generosity is motivated less by immediate need than by the recognition of a purpose that transcends the present moment. Successful capital campaigns are about memory and hope, not bricks and mortar. Why do we find it so difficult to imagine the kind of generosity we see in building campaigns permeating the whole of our work as religious communities? A deep appreciation of the gifts we receive from our living faith and life itself, coupled with visionary leadership, should be enough to move the heart to generosity.

Overall, Unitarian Universalists already live with abundance – but we seem slow to acknowledge it and recognize that our relative prosperity has moral consequences. Collectively, we are privileged almost to the point of embarrassment. What may be lacking is a sense of gratitude to the past and obligation to the future. The culture of abundance is where gratitude and obligation meet. We even have a name for it – it's called thanksgiving. In the end, our demonstrable abundance will blossom as a culture of abundance when we respond to life's grace and good fortune in reckless thanksgiving.