

Pledge Sunday March 1, 2009 Reading and Sermon

READING: Not Again!

Pledge Sunday is not my favorite topic, and I am pretty sure it is not yours either. It's like trying to pull on a wet sandy bathing suit, or finding a way to doctor up castor oil so it doesn't taste so vile. There is never an easy way to do this and unlike many other churches who will attempt to guilt congregants into giving, with threats of eternal damnation if you don't shell out enough so your godly pastor can afford the payments on his 'Beemer,' Unitarian Universalists are particularly shy about asking for help and for money, so we try to find convoluted and interesting ways to say, "hey, we need your bucks". In the old days next to tithing and pew rentals church folks actually paid for abuse! If you snoozed during a 3 hour sermon an usher would dramatically storm up the aisle and bonk you on the head with a 12' pole. There was no heat to speak of, other than the hot air coming from the preacher and church etiquette was compulsory. No coughing, sneezing, laughter, belching or any other innocuous body sounds that would disturb the holiness and brilliance of the service. Children learned their bible verses and were punished should they slip up. Mine verse was the 23rd Psalm which I recited perfectly, but I whenever I recited it, it was with an uneasiness as I always wondered who Shirley was and why was she following me! As a UU I knew I could ask and get an honest and respectful answer. Yes, It was my Girl Scout Leader.

So this morning as we sit in our un- rented, padded pews, in the warmth of the 7 furnaces that heat our building, knowing our children are being taught the lessons of human kindness, and our words and music can be spoken and sung from the wisdom of many traditions, our pledge committee has prepared a reverse collection, where you are invited to take a dollar out of the plate a gentle, subtle hint, a reminder, amid the holiness of our UU rituals to assist you in thinking about our the purpose of our pledge drive in the days to come.

You all are invited to the lunch immediately following the service -- grab your coffee, get your place and enjoy.

SERMON: *Is it Worth The Dream?*

During my Christmas break in Massachusetts, I stopped into the local convenience store for a quart of milk. The store was surprisingly crowded for 2 in the afternoon.

I soon found myself at the end of a very long and growing line of empty handed customers. It became apparent that the attraction was that weekly pursuit of the big hope, commonly known in my neck of the woods as Megabucks, Mass millions, numbers game, black jack and a multitude of many other possibilities irresistibly beckoning to a hopeful and willing public. Sales at this small neighborhood store did its share of contributing to the national average of 277 tickets sold per minute.

There was only one cash register in operation, therefore one long line of potential lottery millionaire want- to- bees or should I say pray-to-bees, with much more fervent meditation going on than I ever saw in church!

As people patiently waited their turn in silence you could almost hear it, "Please dear God make me rich, I need it... I deserve it... I promise I'll share...even with Great Aunt Esmirelda who hates me..."

After the appropriate moments of silence as each one reflected on the possibilities of their impending good fortune, customers began to share their methods for selecting their sacred numbers, each ticket to be purchased carried their own secret formula for winning combinations. Anniversaries, birthdays, social security numbers, prescriptions offered by telephone psychics at \$3.99 a minute and many others concocted from a myriad of creative methods. All of this anticipation depended upon the final resting place of six little ping pong balls carrying the winning numbers to be revealed at five minutes to eight that evening.

Upon leaving the store, without a ticket of my own, I noticed that the ground was covered with discarded scratch tickets. I detest littering so I picked them up to throw them away.

When they were all collected I began to add up the cost. There must have been at least 4 or 5 of every ticket sold, from one dollar to \$10.00 totaling \$138.00 in losers. What a waste. Someone's dream went right down the drain, but as I have often heard, "there is always next week!"

As much as I dislike the attraction of the lottery, particularly among those who can least afford to take such chances with their hard earned money, I can fully understand the excitement of the moment, of imagining a glorious future filled with dreams and fantasies of what it would be like not to have to work, to have the home and car of your choice, to travel anywhere in the world on a whim, with no financial obligations what so ever. The lottery has indeed given us all an excuse to dream, to gamble on the chance that we might be THE big lucky winner, recipient of the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow... regardless of the fact that we are more likely to be hit by an asteroid than to win the lottery!

Humankind has found many ways to gamble, to take chances on everything from the megabucks jackpot to our own destiny. We all understand the odds printed on the back of a lottery ticket.

We relish the dream, anyway, that it might come true with every roll of the dice or swipe of a card, but most of our living is not dependent upon that one in a zillion chance, nor is it rooted in the idea that we should just sit back and wait to see what fate has in store for us.

I cannot help but compare all the dreaming and wishing that goes on with the purchase of a lottery ticket to the basic beliefs of Calvinism, that originated in the 1600's. John Calvin believed that we are all victims of double predestination, of God's immortal will, that we are born either damned, doomed to a miserable life or saved to the graces of heaven and all of its rewards, neither of which have anything to do with good works or a kind heart, and there's not a darn thing we can do about it.

Some, said the Calvinists, are born to be winners and some are born to be losers.

A belief in double predestination was a very common way of explaining why some folks are lucky in life and some simply are not.

Even today there are many who feel they are either blessed or cursed by the Almighty and there is no more proof needed than to listen to the comments in a lottery ticket line on the night of a big drawing.

It was that every premise of exactly who is damned and who is saved, that became the roots of our church here in Syracuse.

As Calvinism resurfaced again in the mid 1800's and prompted the split in the Congregational church that evolved into both Unitarianism and Universalism in this country, our religious ancestors began this church with a fearlessness, a belief that was personal and deep, made up of both men and women who chose to gamble on the premise that all people are deserving of salvation. Everyone can be a winner on this earth and in the hereafter though our own efforts, as we believe that no child comes into this world already labeled as blessed or cursed.

Our church began one hundred and sixty six years ago because of one very radical idea that WE DO NOT HAVE TO SPEND A SINGLE WAKING MOMENT STANDING PASSIVELY IN LINE WAITING TO DISCOVER WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE WINNERS OR LOOSERS.

It was a big gamble standing up to the voice of religious authority and in spite of the uproar this new radical religion caused of salvation for all, we are proudly still here.

As a church, there is no archdiocese, Bishop or lottery to determine if we should exist or not. We own our own building, and could paint the sanctuary fuchsia and the narthex mauve, if we so desired. We determine the curriculum for our children and youth and are all free to heave a proverbial tomato at this pulpit if we are unhappy with what we hear. (please don't you might spoil my make-up!) We gamble everyday on our choices here and have given to this community the message that we are

different from most churches in that our voice is truly our own, not one of an authority whose dreams may be very different from those we envision. Our religious ancestors made sure of that and gave Calvinism the good old heave-ho when our own worth, dignity and religious freedoms were threatened.

As we evolve and respond to the needs and issues of these times, our committees have been taking a good look at the future, at what it will take in time and money to strengthen our building, assure the quality of our Music and Religious Education programs to improve our communication, to bring new and relevant programming to our members and the community and to maintain our rites of passage, that mark our heritage and our mission.

The Finance committee has been hard at work determining what it will take to maintain all that we cherish as well as focusing on our future dreams as a church family which will be presented to you all as painlessly as possible. There is no easy way out of this, and the Canvas Committee is trying to find a gentle and polite way of asking you to gamble on us.

Ten of you may have found attached to your order of service an envelope which I would now like you to open. They each contain a lottery ticket

Go ahead open it and scratch! (Wait for tickets to be scratched, they are in the orders of service) Any big winners?

Well, I guess the Pledge Drive is still on! In that case, we will ask you to invest in your church, in the parts we can see, the programs the building, the heat the paint, the staff, but more importantly the parts that are you don't always see... the dream and the vision that fosters the care and the worth of the critical human needs of this church and of our larger community.

It is not always possible to attach a dollar value to the work we do, so many have given hours and hours of volunteer time which in itself is a pledge.

I would rather have a member head up the garage Sale or pledge a day setting up and pricing items which could bring more into our coffers than anyone one person could afford, than to simply fade away for fear of having to pledge what one does not have.

Our volunteers, starting with our officers and our committee members, teachers, workshop leaders and outreach workers, singers and musicians are the very heart of this church, which could not operate with out them. For those who can dig deep please do for every cent uncovered is a gift to our future health.

Money is crucial, but to invest in a church means that we are fully aware of what we gain from its existence, as a real and significant way to strengthen ourselves, our message of faith and our families and as a means to actively respond with the strength of this community to the growing difficulties and insecurities we face in our public and private lives. But I would ask you first to dream more abundantly, for our very faith has always been built upon every one of them.

In closing, I have three props that I would like to share with you this morning. The first is my LOTTERY TICKET, unscratched. For those seconds of revealing the hidden numbers beneath, there is an exhilaration, a rush of adrenalin, a moment of anticipation that I could possibly be a winner. I will probably be disappointed as I always am when I waste my time thinking that a minimal investment and no effort could possibly make my dreams come true.

The second is the MEMBERSHIP BOOK, filled with names of those who have given life and promise to this church, whose dreams and accomplishments we have inherited and now ponder how we in turn will present them to our children.

Finally a KEY TO THE FRONT DOOR. It costs the same as one lottery ticket.

The difference is that what lies behind those doors is as sure a thing as we choose it to be, a tribute to our choices which have taught the young that they matter, and that our elders that they are not alone, that allows for alternatives in worship, that recognize the diversity of our faith, that can grow far beyond the limitations of these walls.

May we find the courage and the resources. May we know our truth and our visions well. Visions have never started with money. They start with dreams and courage, they begin with a fearlessness that is personal that transcends any obstacle no matter how difficult.

May we be willing to see them through, for that has been and still is the way and the future of our living faith.

So be it, Amen

Rev Holly Baylies©2009

OFFERTORY/ Anthem : If you want to give to this church in the way you could never give before, just reach into the pocket of the person in front of you...!
The offering will now be received!