

What Do We Really Need?

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

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Happy Thanksgiving to all of you and to your families. This is a time when we, with some intention, remember to be grateful for all that we have – and most of us have quite a bit to be thankful for, even amidst our difficulties and illnesses and remembered loved ones. This is also the time of year when we are most reminded of those who are less fortunate than we are. Our Guest At Your Table boxes in which we are collecting our loose change for the good projects of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, are a simple way we can make a big difference to others less fortunate than ourselves. I'd like to talk this morning about some ideas for doing even more.

What are our most essential needs in this world, anyway? What do we really need? Air, water, shelter, warmth, food? Love? Acknowledgement? A means to support those who are dependent on us? Mostly today I'm talking about material things. Stuff. And maybe money, too.

I am *not* one of the most wealthy people in this country, yet I consider myself to be extremely fortunate and financially comfortable. I have more house than I really need, although it is very lovely and extremely convenient when family and friends come to visit. I definitely have more "stuff" than I need – more clothes, more dishes, more artwork, more furniture. It's really not fair that I have all this, is it? And what reason could I ever come up with that could justify my "deserving" all these things? Especially when others do not even have *enough* of these same things. I do not really need, nor do I deserve all the riches that I have. I cannot imagine how anyone could be as rich as the richest are, and not give most of it away. I already want to give away, to good use, a great deal of what I have.

Perhaps you, too, find yourself described in Richard Gilbert's words from our reading, "We who have taken pleasure in our prosperity are vaguely anxious that millions of others, living in our very midst, have not enjoyed the same bounty." The questions he raises are not just matters of economics. They are moral issues, justice issues, religious issues. "If economic policies are to be just and effective," Gilbert writes, "if we are to make sense of the questions of how much we deserve, ethics and economics must be rejoined in a common dialogue. And in that dialogue the economic system should be the servant, not the master, of humanity.... For Aristotle, economics (or *oikonomia*, management of the household) was [actually] a branch of ethics and addressed the question of whether each person in the household received what is required for a fully human life. The economist Adam Smith was [also] a moral philosopher who believed that moral sentiment would hold in check the acquisitive human nature that, in turn, drives the economy." (UU World, Nov./Dec 2001) Hmm....moral sentiment might hold in check our human nature to gather and acquire and consume? Even I, ever brandishing my rose colored glasses, have a hard time believing that one.

In his book, How Much Do We Deserve?, Gilbert outlines a number of principles he proposes as tests for the justice of our economic policies. He calls them “canons of distributive justice” and cites a book by Father John Ryan as his inspiration. (All of the following quoted text is from UU World, Nov/Dec 2001, Richard Gilbert, How Much Do We Deserve?)

First is **the canon of need**. “All human beings have the inherent right to have their basic human needs met before any economic surplus is distributed to others. Simply stated, the basic needs of the poor transcend the superfluous desires of the rich in moral importance. One historical perspective on this issue comes from the 1917 ‘Declaration of Social Principles’ of the Universalist Church of America. The statement advocates ‘An Economic Order which shall give to every human being an equal share in the common gifts of God, and in addition all that he [sic] shall earn by his own labor.’” Particularly in the early days of our now combined faiths, the Universalists were much more vocal on matters of human rights, justice and equality. The Unitarians, on the other hand, were for the most part the wealthier citizens, perhaps ethically compromised by the need to hold on to and justify their own status in society.

The **canon of proportional equality** is that “every human being should be limited in his or her consumption of income and wealth by the principle of sufficiency. This is an ethic of limits, a floor based on need and ceiling based on proportionality, as articulated in Plato’s Laws. Plato believed that the ratio between the richest and the poorest person in the ideal state was 4 to 1. [This] is based on an ethic of enough; that is, beyond a certain level, income is not only superfluous but morally and spiritually corrupting.”

Far more subjective is the third canon, the **canon of contribution to the common good**, which states that “work that serves the community should be valued more highly than work that serves only a few. A distributive ethic needs to factor in the community-building value [of care.] Contribution to the common good is an imperfect [What exactly *is* the common good?] but necessary consideration in the allocation of resources in a just society.” For example, should a professional athlete receive more money for what he or she does than a social worker or a teacher?

The last three principles are the **canon of productivity, the canon of effort and sacrifice**, and the **canon of scarcity**, which are each rather complicated and in reality, probably as equally not “doable” as the first three. Gilbert himself writes “While I defend the ethics of this view, I am not so naïve as to believe it has a chance of becoming public or private policy. Nonetheless, the issue must be engaged. At the very least, it would prompt a fascinating exercise in values clarification.”

Along these same lines there is a famous quote by Archbishop Oscar Romero that says “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.” A great many of the ideals of distributive justice are about undoing the *reasons* why we have so many poor people, and this undoing will of necessity take us away from letting the “market” alone control our economics and into a

system that looks more and more socialistic. Not communist in the political sense, but communal in the interdependent web sense.

It can get rather discouraging to think about what might actually be necessary to straighten out what is wrong with our economic system and its disparities. We addressed some of these in our discussion last Sunday about the Ten Principles of Sustainable Society, presented by Nan Wiegersma, as proposed by a group working on Alternatives to Economic Globalization. Many of these ideals involve difficult sacrifices and positions that will undoubtedly be unpopular with many, if not most, people in positions of wealth and power. I've briefly outlined them in the December newsletter for those of you who are interested or could not make it to our first discussion of the Sustainable Community Initiative.

But I, for one, (and I believe you as well) would really like to DO something, as limited in effect as it might be given the larger picture, and not just TALK about it ad infinitum. Perhaps we could come up with more fundraising projects, so that some of them could be for the worthwhile benefit of supporting this institution that houses and feeds our UU voice in the community and the world, but also so that some of them might raise money for other worthy causes in our town and in our country. We do this with our 10% offering to social justice causes each week. I'd love to see this percentage grow, maybe even to 100%, and I'll be talking more about this idea in a few months. Today I am just watering the seed I know we are already thinking about...

The ninth principle for sustainable societies (from Nan's talk, and the reprint on the back table) is all about equity. It's about canceling third world debt and doing away with the International Monetary Fund. It's about the huge and growing gap between the richest and the poorest and also about the justice issues arising from the waste and pollution that the most wealthy countries are inflicting on the so-called undeveloped countries. In April I'll be talking to you about why environmental issues are really justice issues. These are all important and somewhat heady approaches to undoing the inequities of life. Mostly they have to do with money, not stuff.

In addition to money, though, in what other ways could we divest ourselves of some of the stuff in our possession that could be of much more essential use to someone else? I would love to hear your ideas on this, and the things you are already doing along these lines. Remember last year when our religious education classes collected their own toys and other objects that they were willing to let go of in order to raise money for Jessie's House, a shelter for families in transition? What a lovely example they have set for us!

Here are some of my ideas, a certainly non-exhaustive list...

We could ask our relatives to make donations to an organization or cause of their choice, or ours, instead of material gifts this Holiday season.

We could go through our clothes and give away what we no longer use or want. Think of the extra closet space we would all have! I've been specifically thinking that I would like

to donate my extra clothes to an organization that targets women who cannot afford appropriate clothes to wear to work (or to interviews to get work). If you know of such an organization around here, please let me know. If you'd like to join me in a larger effort to collect clothes from many more of us in the congregation, let me know that as well.

We could hold an "extras" sale and give-away, partly as fundraiser, but also partly to redistribute some of that rummage we have about the house – and the basement. Rummage around and think about what you don't need anymore. I personally do not feel the need to sell all of my extras – I would be just fine giving at least some of them away.

It's important, I think, to mention that I don't want anyone to feel guilty if they don't feel like they can just give things away. We each need to be responsible and responsive to our own needs and financial situation. Generous and responsible at the same time – there is a balancing act to some of this.

I am very thankful in this season – and always. But I am also aware of the abundance, and even over-abundance, in my life.

A. Powell Davies, one of our favorite ministers from the not so distant past, wrote an outstanding Thanksgiving prayer with which I would like to end this reflection. He writes:

O God, when we thank Thee for what is given to us and not to others, let us remember to pray softly, for there will be many who overhear. Let conscience search our gratitude! This bounty did not come to us because, beyond the rest of men [and women], we were deserving. Help us to remember that from those to whom much has been given, much is expected: remind us of our mission to [humankind]. These are our brothers [and sisters]. We are one family. O God to whom we bring our gratitude, help us to remember the many who will overhear!