

**15 March 2009 * “Living Lightly in Lean Times”
© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak U.U. Congregation**

*David has counted both his money and his blessings.
The Divine Economy loves him much more than the capitalist one does.*

~ Facebook status for one of Erika’s friends

When an illusion shatters, you can feel it. I can remember one such time: I was in my late teens, and had stopped in at the bank on the corner of North Sandusky and Winter Street, in the town where I grew up. Only half-way through college, I had long grown restless within the confines of my small Ohio hometown, both geographically and spiritually. My spiritual restlessness was a fish-out-of-water feeling, which disappeared when I finally moved within view of the Pacific Ocean. The geographical restlessness, on the other hand, arose out of one of the greatest gifts I’ve received from my parents: an appreciation and love for travel, and a genuine curiosity about how people live in other countries.

In the years leading up to that day in that bank lobby, my parents – who had never owned a new car, never ate at restaurants, never bought clothing that wasn’t on sale – had taken my brother and me to a handful of foreign countries. (I had a passport full of ink before I ever had my first credit card, or my first car.)

So as I stepped up to the bank teller that afternoon, I was looking through the lens of *that particular privilege* as I glanced over her shoulder and onto the counter. There was a stack of jauntily colored bills. “Wow! That’s pretty currency,” I exclaimed with the polished elan of a world traveler. “Which country is it from?”

The bank teller looked over her shoulder, confused. “Are you talking about *those?*,” she clarified. Peering at me more closely, she set the record straight: “Those are food stamps.”

This was by no means the first time I came face-to-face with the reality of poverty; it *was* the most humbling. I thought, at the time, that the emotion I felt was simple embarrassment. Over the past eighteen years or so, I’ve come to understand that what I felt was actually the world ripping a jagged tear through my naivete, as I came face-to-face with how *securely*, how *comfortably* I’d been raised. Sure, I was frequently embarrassed by my mom’s assiduous use of coupons and rebates; and outraged, as only an adolescent can be, that we couldn’t afford the hip clothing labels that my friends wore. But not only had I never seen a food stamp – I’d been raised with enough privilege to know a Mexican *peso* bill from a Swiss *franc* note.

“Privilege” isn’t an easy word to like – it sounds so haughty, like it’s just asking to be judged – so let me provide an alternate definition: to be *privileged* is to have a long reach, a wide umbrella, and many occasions on which to call yourself “lucky.”

When you “have a long reach,” you can find and grasp resources efficiently. Sometimes it’s because of your *alma mater*, or your *paterfamilias*; a generous ancestor or a well-timed scholarship. Any way it arrives, “a long reach” greases your wheels: you can navigate your way in the world with less effort and greater ease than others can. And as the image of a “wide umbrella” suggests, privilege also shelters its holders: we don’t have to see certain things; we don’t have to endure certain things; we *don’t even have to know about* certain things (like food stamps). Both of these phenomena, when unexamined, often get labeled as “luck.”

★ I bring this up because these are lean times, *vulnerable* times, in our country. As a people, our luck – by which I mean our privilege – has taken a hit. The shrinking of everything from the stock market to the job force to our 401(K)’s has left many of us feeling shaky and disoriented. Our umbrellas have shrunk, in that few of us feel as protected and buffered as we once did. Our “long reach” has been shortened, as we find it more challenging to pay the same old bills, or provide ourselves with familiar comforts.

There is, I believe, little purpose in my talking about the hows and whos of arriving in this place. Needless to say, these lean times are due in small part to our own doing and our own carelessness, as citizens, and also due to the sins of omission and sins of commission of those whose greed ran unrestrained for too long.

It’s more important, I think, to turn our awareness to that which falls within our agency: the things we have control over, the decisions that will determine whether we emerge from this financial freefall with our sanity *and* our values intact. This is a time to move with caution: to make careful choices – both material and spiritual.

Here, as I see it, are a few of them:

* I choose to begin in a place of giving thanks – thanks for all that I have, and for the shelter and safety net of family, who (I’m certain) would be there for me if ever I lost all that I have. I’m just as grateful that the roll of the universe’s financial dice has been kind to our congregation. Where many congregations, UU and otherwise, are down-sizing staff and shutting their doors due to their financial struggles, we are in no such position. With the continued grace and generosity of you, Live Oak’s members, in this stewardship season and beyond, the strength of our shared ministry will be equaled by the strength of our financial health.

This choice to be grateful will be ours to make, for a long time. When the media lures us to focus solely on what’s been lost – and I do not mean to overlook just how much has been lost – will we remember to consider what we still *have*? When the competing voices of panic and groundedness swell up inside of us, which one will we choose to tune our ears to? Whose message will we choose to believe?

* I choose to remember that some of you are – quietly, privately – feeling the pinch of our nation’s economic downturn, while others have the luxury of being insulated from its sting. We were never in the same place to begin with, economically, but lately I’ve been stepping with even greater sensitivity, knowing that the gaps between us might be widening. How carefully will we choose to proceed, and how much gentleness will we afford each other?

★ That leads to another crucial choice: Will we give into shame?¹ You know, friends, that even on a good day, money is a charged subject: prickly with the electricity of secrecy and guilt and pride. I say to you: there is no shame in needing help, or in speaking about our losses and fears around money. It is a *spiritual* act, to remember that the measure of our lives and our worth is *not* reflected by our finances.

My colleague, the Reverend Rob Hardies, has pointed out that shame can also take the form of “survivor’s guilt” – feelings of discomfort for *having* resources while others lose theirs. Will those of us with healthy salaries or bank accounts view our resources with shame? Will we view our resources *not* as something to feel apologetic about, but rather as a helpful tool? Money, after all, “does not have absolute value; it has instrumental value. It is only as good as what we exchange for it.”²

When we feel embarrassed, either because of the money we have or because of the money we lack, will we choose to learn from where we are, and allow our circumstances to teach us something new about ourselves?

★ There are, of course, concrete choices that face us; because of its instrumental value, there’s power in how we choose to use our resources. Whether out of necessity or a sense of foreboding, many of us are assessing our lives with new criteria. Perhaps you’ve always been able to afford a gym membership, *and* 100 cable channels, *and* a summer vacation... and now, the choice might be which one of those you’ll keep.

The old choice in your family might have been which restaurant to go to every week; and now you might be asking yourselves how creative you can be cooking at home, and taking bag lunches to work. Or maybe the choice you used to make was *which* car model to upgrade to, and now it’s how long you can get by with the old one.

These are all *spiritual* choices, although their trappings are material: they show us what we value. There’s something to be said for the process of deliberation, uncomfortable though it may be: decisions like these might present the first opportunity in a long time to thoughtfully consider which comforts are necessary for us, and which ones are superfluous. Which will prove to be which – will we give priority, in our spending, to that which is truly most sustaining and important? Will we have the honesty to look at our financial choices and see, reflected back to one-hundredth of a dollar, what’s most important to us?

* Here's an even deeper set of spiritual decisions: Will we allow our trust to be taken from us? I've already explained that some of the costs we've suffered go beyond the realm of money: some of you have lost your sense of security, your peace of mind, or even the hope of an early retirement. You might've lost your trust in the banking industry, or in Wall Street; you may be tormenting yourselves by playing that heart-breaking game called "If Only." Will we forgive ourselves for the choices we made? Will we be gentle with ourselves, knowing that each of us does the best we can, at any given time, with any given set of circumstances, unable to make predictions in an unpredictable world?

When it comes to trusting *others*, will we choose to exercise those "trust muscles" until they become supple again? Will we be willing to place our well-being in the hands of others, wisely and thoughtfully, or will we preemptively cut short our trust in those who have power over us?

* That leads to the last set of questions involving our spiritual choices: Will we continue to prize, in our congregation, the currency of relationship? Will we choose abundance over scarcity?

Don't forget: when we immerse ourselves in this spiritual community, we shed the "consumer" identity that the world imposes on us; the laws and forces of the marketplace lose much of their potency over us. Stepping through these doors is an implicit invitation for the forces of scarcity to dissipate and the spirit of abundance to take over. Our liberal faith has always called us to voice a "yes" to the unspoken questions of the Universe. Will we continue to live with open hearts, saying "yes" to life and to its invitations?

Because the fact is, money isn't the only currency that circulates in the world. The U.S. Treasury recognizes American greenbacks; a grocery store may recognize food stamps. There are just as many *unofficial* ways – more – to measure a life, and the quality of how we spend our days, and our energy.

In these times, fraught with fear and need, may we keep our hearts open, may we shelter one another, and may we keep extending the long arm of generosity.

Endnotes

1. This question "belongs" to my colleague, the Reverend Rob Hardies, from a sermon he delivered at All Souls (UU) Church in Washington, D.C.

2. Again, Rob Hardies, from his sermon.