

How Thankful Do We Have to Be?  
Rev. Kathleen Owens  
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Hear these words by Nancy Shaffer: This making of a whole self takes such a very long time: pieces are not sequential nor our supplies. We work here, then there, hold up tattered fabric to the light. Sew past dark, intent. Use all our thread. // Sleeves may come before length; buttons, before a rounded neck. We sew at what most needs us, and as it asks, sew again. // The self is not one thing, once made, unaltered. Not midnight task alone, not after other work. It's everything we come upon, make ours: all this fitting of what-once-was and has-become.

Just the other day I bought a new book, *The Audacity to Win* by David Plouffe, Obama's campaign manager during the election. It's a book that revels behind-the-scene events that happened in the election. Just starting to read it, the book brought back the campaign and the election and all the feelings I enjoyed: mostly, the experience of hope, once again. I also remembered Obama's call to us to move beyond our experience, to reach out, get involved and that a different way of governing, of being, of what it means to be a citizen in this country could mean – all of that seemed possible; it was so inspiring. He called on us to be more than we had been or thought possible for ourselves. He identified a yearning residing in many of us – and spoke to our deeper desires. Now, well into this term, amid the muck and partisanship of politics, healthcare reform and the debates, the continuing war and the recession – I needed and wanted to be reminded of and called back to my deeper longings – that higher calling.

It is not just in society and in politics that I have felt this and heard from so many of you of a desire for more, to go deeper, to find more meaning – but it resides in our spiritual/religious lives as well. Last year we instituted monthly transformational themes for our worship life

together. These themes expanded into our Home Connections, into our religious education time at our South Bay campus, and in our Spiritual Friendship circles. We take these themes seriously because we all have a need for transformation in our lives and in this community, both religious and the larger community beyond our walls. This month's theme is focused on Generosity. It's an appropriate theme given the holidays within this month: All Souls Day – we give thanks for those in our lives who were meaningful; and then there's Thanksgiving later this month. I know and believe that for a healthy, balanced life, it is crucial that we spend time, everyday and on special occasions throughout the year, reflecting on our life and giving thanks for the gifts in it.

In last week's service, Arvid announced our desire and our decision to change this congregation's practice of generosity offerings. For years, we have given one offering a month to a non-profit whose work reflects our values. It has been a meaningful practice and last year we gave away a lot of money. However, many of you have encouraged us to go further in this endeavor, and so, beginning in January, we will be giving away all of the offering, every Sunday of the month away. You see, we want to practice what we preach – we want this congregation to practice the spiritual discipline of giving away money, knowing that as we give, so we receive, in a variety of ways. Of course, this is not something we just cooked up. The world's religions all have a lot to say about money and the giving of it. In the Christian faith tradition, you are asked and expected, if you're a serious person of faith and wanting to follow the practice of what the Bible says, to give a tithe – which is a tenth of your annual income, to support the church. In the Muslim faith – a Zakat, or monetary gift of at least 2.5% a year on all income is given and more during the holiday of Ramadan. In the Jewish tradition, Rabbis advocated for Ma'aser, meaning a tenth of income and it too is in their culture and scripture. The Sikh code of Conduct advocates 10% given to charity and the Hindu tradition guides Hindus to give according to their ability and

position – which for a family man would be up to 50%. The Buddhist teachings focus on right livelihood and right action as a guide to giving to the community. So what about Unitarian Universalists? Well, that's an important question. You see, we don't have one sacred text from which we are instructed or guided by to suggest giving. Some of us give 10%, some 5% and some of us give what we feel we can, after life's expenses. And there are some who simply toss whatever loose change they have in their pockets into the offering pouch. There are many ways for us to give money to support the mission of this congregation - through pledges, offerings, and planned giving. All ways are important and useful – the planned giving usually includes remembering the church in your will; Susan Harding is the chair of Planned Giving and she and other members of that committee would be happy to talk with you about Planned Giving and the Channing Society.

The loose offerings have been a part of our operating budget – that's the budget that helps pay the light bill, keep the heat on and pay salaries. And, come January, we're giving that part of our operating budget away. It's an act of faith really. You see, we're choosing to live out that spiritual discipline of giving and our operating budget will be based on pledges. Some of us may not understand the difference between the two so here's the quick version: pledges for maintaining this congregation and its mission are made either when you become a new member or during the early spring when we have our annual canvass. Like your favorite public radio station, if you have one, pledges are made in writing or in conversation followed up by a written statement and then payments on that pledge can be made weekly, monthly, quarterly, once-a-year – whatever fits your financial lifestyle. And for you worshipping at the Hillcrest campus, this is where those yellowish envelopes come in. You see them in front of you – tucked in with the hymnals (this is the show-and-tell part of the sermon) – you can put money toward your

pledge in those envelopes – cash or check. But here's the thing: you need to write your name and say it's to go toward your pledge. We have had people put cash in there – without identifying it and so it doesn't get funneled to the correct place (offering or pledge). For me, there is a huge difference between pledges and offerings. Healthy pledges are what we need to keep the doors open and the lights on...offerings are the extras – for me, an offering is an expression of thanks, of gratitude for the gifts of and in our lives; as one dear woman said it, offerings are where the blessings come in – that's why she adds a little extra to her tithe.

Like Arvid, I grew up in the Christian faith tradition. Tithing was emphasized in the church I grew up in. And when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I got my first job. I cleaned in a school with my mom and two other people. During the school year I worked 5 days a week, 5 hours a night and in the summer, 8 hours a day. It was a good job and I know I was most likely the richest 7<sup>th</sup> grader in my school. That job instilled in me many important qualities and taught me the value of money. And when I collected one of my first paychecks, I clearly remember two things my folks did with me around money. First, we went up to the local bank, near the grocery store, and I opened my first savings account – that was neat because there I could cash my paycheck and they gave me a little book that told me how much money I had. The next thing they did was to sit me down in the kitchen and explain the principle of tithing. This is what I remember they said; now that you're making money, you need to give some of it back. The Bible tells us that we are give 10% to the church. That means, for every dollar you make, you give the church a dime. We do this because we have been blessed and we say thank you to God by doing this. I looked around at my folks, the house I was living in, the clothes on my back and the fact that I could buy books or whatever else I wanted with the rest – to me 90% seemed like so much to live on, and that God wanted back so little – I quickly decided I would do that. One of my first

checks was for about \$120 dollars. So after payday, when I cashed my check, I took out \$12 dollars and on Sunday, we went to church and I put my money in an envelope and wrote my name on it and put it in the offering plate when it passed by. I felt like such a grown up – and I felt deeply connected to my church and my God because I was giving back, I was contributing and it felt good. I felt deep gratitude for my life and the blessings I had / and I felt lucky because I got to keep 90% of my check - it was more than enough.

I worked in that school until my senior year in high school – and I tithed every paycheck with that and each job I had...until I left the Christian faith in my late twenties. When I found Unitarian Universalism, I stopped tithing. For many reasons. One, they didn't ask me to tithe; there wasn't an expectation. Money was a difficult subject to talk about and it was easier to say, give what you can or what you feel is right. I was surprised by this attitude and like most social creatures, I joined in with what I thought the crowd was doing – and it wasn't tithing. Secondly, I found a lot of good reasons not to tithe – I wasn't making a lot, I was re-thinking/understanding my theology, I just moved and couldn't afford it...and my favorite excuse was, “well, I'm in seminary now and my whole life is about church and the divine – surely I don't need to do that anymore.” So I didn't. Now, nothing dramatic happened to me because I stopped tithing; I wasn't cursed with illness, I didn't go without – but I have to say, after seminary and working full time again, and not tithing, I felt a subtle shift in my spirit...it was easy to ignore and yet, I have felt like I wasn't quite whole in my self. I'm now settled in ministry and in a congregation and I have a need to be more whole; I want transformation in my life, in our congregation and community. It has long been my practice to not ask a question I'm not willing to answer; to never ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do myself. My sense of integrity and my desire for spiritual wholeness calls me to create a financial plan that will get me up to tithing

again, soon and at the very least, within five years starting now (I am still paying back seminary loans). I have started creating this plan and I have to say I feel more in-line with my values, more connected to how I want to live and who I want to be in this world, and in this community.

The poet writes, “I was just minding my own business when I found myself on their straw hillsides, citron and butter-colored and was happy, and why not? ... All day on their airy backbones they toss in the wind, they bend as though it was natural and godly to bend, they rise in a stiff sweetness, in the pure peace of giving one’s gold away.” Gratitude and generosity are so much more about money...and I have found it to be true – that when I am faithful and intentional, generous in the many ways I can be, with my money, my time, my attitude, my thoughts – when I am generous and give, I have and do and expect to continue to receive back in kind. It does not come back measure for measure, I give one day and receive the same back or more the very next day; the spiritual reality and principle doesn’t work like that for me. It’s a lifestyle, it’s a choice to make every day and as I am faithful, then when I have been in need, I have received, that need has been met.

We gather here in this community, some of us on a Saturday afternoon, most of us on a Sunday morning, wanting something more in our lives. We come here to work for justice, to find or experience peace, we want to be better people – more spiritually mature. We want hope and transformation in our lives. The best way I know how that comes about is by giving away that which we seek. It is a spiritual truth that does not stand up to logic; it is greater than our ability to reason. It is a way of life and you are invited to join those of us in this community who are taking the risk and saying Yes; saying yes to a life that is transformed and meaningful. The title of this sermon is How thankful do we have to be – there isn't any “have to” about it; the real question is what is it that you want in your life; how willing are you to giving it away so that you might

receive? You are invited into the sewing circle to continue creating your whole self. Come, give yourself, your treasures, your time away – come, participate and be made whole. May it be so.