

Spirit and Matter: Bringing Money Back from the Brink of Madness

A Sermon Offered At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

March 15, 2009

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Readings

From *The Progress Paradox* by Gregg Easterbrook

Far from feeling better about their lives, many are feeling worse. Throughout the United States and the European Union, incidence of clinical melancholy has been rising in eerie synchronization with rising prosperity: Adjusting for population growth, unipolar depression, the condition in which a person simply always feels blue, is today ten times more prevalent as it was half a century ago.

Some modern disaffection may be attributed to autogrumbling – that no matter how much conditions improve, people will always want to know why things aren't still better. Someday if Eden is restored, people may complain about the predictable menu of milk and honey and about the friendly lions purring too loudly.

Widespread melancholy and pessimism amidst plenty and freedom may hold significance beyond the human proclivity to complain. As Alan Wolfe of Boston University has noted, a leading question of our moment in history is “Why capitalism and liberal democracy, both of which justify themselves on the grounds that they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number, leave so much dissatisfaction in their wake.”

Also from Gregg Easterbrook – the Progress Paradox

If the last century of human progress teaches anything, it is that it's never too late to change the world. In our lifetimes, “impossible” problems that could “never” be solved – pollution, crime, indigent old age, the Cold War – have declined or disappeared before our eyes. Astonishing reforms and progress have been accomplished more rapidly, and in most cases at lower cost than anyone dared hope. Endlessly, experience teaches that we need to accept what we see out the window; we can make the view one of our choosing.

The reason that the problems of the present – such as developing world destitution, greenhouse gasses, or poverty amidst American plenty – seem unsolvable today is simply that we have not yet begun the work of solving them. We should for it is never too late to change the world. Want can end and be forgotten; even in a world of many billions of souls, there can be a safe and secure place for everyone. It is ours to decide what the future will hold.

Sermon

Okay – let me get to the point – this could be an awkward moment to be delivering a Stewardship Sermon – or – in plainer English – talking with you about pledges – in fancier English this is known in clergy circles as the Sermon on the Amount. Anyway – what with the global economic crisis – it could be an awkward moment. But I don't think so – in fact I think that this a most appropriate – a perfect time to talk about one of the most powerful forces in our lives. We sing songs to and about money – it's hoarded, worried over, embezzled, worked for, and elusive. It's part of our daily lives and part of the life of this religious institution.

Just a few days ago China declared that it wanted to be like shipmates together with the US to weather this economic storm. It's evident that we're more linked than ever by money. This American Life has done good programs on the financial crisis, made it easier to understand, brought it down to human scale. There are things that are easier to understand – the elimination of jobs – we have people here in this congregation who have lost jobs recently due to the general crisis; the loss of home values. Those things you can grasp – with effort. At the same time it's still hard to comprehend what a global financial crisis looks like – it's hard to wrap your mind around. The part that gets to me, though, is the notion that we suddenly have a crisis.

It was long in the making. There was a certain madness that swept the developed world. I lived in Atlanta where housing prices were like a wild game of profit upon profit. While real estate was shooting higher and higher, there was a heady sense of an oil field where you could drill most anywhere and find black gold. There were millionaires made daily by the dot.com boom – until that went bust. There were unscrupulous practices that made poker chips out of many of our retirement funds. Meanwhile, there are at least two wars that sent this nation into deep debt. To the savvy economist this had to be a nearly certain recipe for disaster.

But that's not what really gets me. I mean -- there's been a global economic crisis for as long as I've been alive – for as long as children have been told that other children in other countries are starving and so they'd better clean their plates. For as long as I can remember going trick or treat for UNICEF, I've known that, while I had enough to eat, a house to live in, and clothes to keep me warm there were people around the world and downtown who didn't have those things. There've been new washers, dryers, and the latest labor saving devices; the newest, fastest – car, computer, phone and there've been people living in bombed out shells of homes, in refugee camps, at the race track, in caves. Since high school I've known that although most of the grown ups I knew had jobs, there were people my age and younger who were stolen or sold into slavery.

There's always been money available to finance war and conflict and there's always been debate about whether there was enough money for education, health care, food, housing, child care.

There has been a global financial crisis for a long time – it only just caught up with us more recently. Meanwhile, there was fiddling while Rome burned.

Until this seemingly recent collapse, every decade for the last hundred years in America, since the depression, has seen a rising overall standard of living. Thanks to our Rem Stokes I picked up a book this week I'd been meaning to read for some time – *The Progress Paradox* by Gregg Easterbrook. Easterbrook cites many critical statistics – but at the heart is this – the overall prosperity in the developing world has been rising over

the last many decades. With that rise has come more and more leisure time. According to researchers at Rockefeller University, the average overall amount of time spent working has been steadily declining over the last 15 decades. It isn't only that people are living longer and retirement is younger. It's that there are shorter work days and less of them. Now, you may be thinking -- hey -- I'm sure busier than all get out -- that's a common complaint. Yet, we are working less than ever -- we're simply making different choices about our time -- what errands we run, what activities we participate in, where we work, shop, and live. And our expectations keep going higher. Where once we thought that owning a car was a luxury -- now the number of cars is a mark of wealth. Where once it was real wealth to have a color TV -- now ordinary households often have three or more televisions. Where once it would have been a great adventure to visit Europe once or twice in a lifetime it's common for people to regularly travel to the farthest corners of the world -- and not the superwealthy -- sometimes the well off and sometimes -- people who can't actually afford it. Our fantasies keep outstripping our realities. What Easterbrook has written about is that while we were up to our necks in progress we felt down at heart. Our wealth -- when it was at its height -- was of little comfort. It kept out the cold -- but it didn't bring happiness. He quotes one statistic and study after another as he talks about the Paradox: that there's been more of everything except happiness.

Perhaps we thought that leisure would bring us time to reflect on life's great questions and to play in the sun. Instead there are countless ways for time to be eaten up by meaningless activity and increasing sadness. I've been thinking about this Paradox long before this week. So, I bet, have many of you.

This week our President suggested that, as the stock market rallied for four days, there would be some good values to buy out there. But here's what I think -- I think that people -- not only Americans -- have spent too much time looking to get good value for their money and failed to invest in things of real value. I think that somehow, somewhere folks became confused about value and forgot values. Kept watching for high principle and not for high principles. Listened to profits instead of prophets. We were living in what comedian and social critic Jon Stewart called an infomercial economy. I remember when our middle kid, James, years ago was in an infomercial stage -- it wasn't so much that he believed in the products -- but he loved the sound of the inflated ideas. It slices, it dices, and it can make you rich quick. We got caught up purchasing material goods instead of working for the material good. We invested in futures instead of the future for which we most deeply hope.

Then the house of cards collapsed. People have been looking for answers. There's been speculation that, perhaps, this collapse may have a silver lining. The silver lining isn't comfortable -- but I know that as previous generations made their way through such challenges before -- they've been stronger and wiser for it.

What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? (Matthew 16:26) perhaps this is the time when we lose the world and regain our souls?

I don't know if there was ever a real time when people's values were better. I don't know if there was an idyllic house-on-the-prairie time when towns were like kin, work was constant, and people were content. I don't know that such idyllic times ever existed. But I know that, inside of each of us there is a longing for such a time and nothing that we acquire can meet the deep longing for that time.

We have that longing – it is part and parcel of our humanity. We crave peace and a time of ease and comfort and to look out upon a world fresh with sweet life and redolent with the blossoming of hope.

We come to this place each week – some come here many times a week – joining in covenant groups, committees, study groups, support groups, choir, Board, and some come mostly on Sundays but each person comes with that longing – even if faint and distant within them – that longing for that fresh world – fresh within them. And they hope to find it and to help make it come to pass here.

Each week we take up an offering. It's part reality and part symbol – I know many people pledge and also bring something to put in the offering plate, so that the hopes that we gather here can be made manifest. Our offering signifies that our congregational life does not rely on other authorities to fund and then to direct our work - it relies upon every one of us to bring our best – our most creative, most mindful, generous, and hopeful selves here and create this place together. So, as the offering is passed, take time to let the music fill you and draw forth your own longing, your wishfulness. Be generous as the offering is passed – though if it is your first time here, please, let the plate pass by. I'd like to take time, before I continue the sermon, to sit quietly together and reflect on what we each carry within us here and hope to find as we come together here. Sometimes our dreams are mislaid or misspent, sometimes they go silent within us – but they are there – they are the reason you came here even today. Every piece of music written or played with feeling, every sermon offered, every good work done by human hands is an offering to others of our dreams, our deep longing for that world fresh within us and around us. Let us be together in the music. *Offering as Interlude.*

Just as you have passed the offering, just so you have something to bring to this place – many things to bring. And you are needed. We have lay ministers who can sit by a bedside during a time of illness, we have care ministries that can help you get to appointments or bring over a casserole. We have so many places for a person to be involved and generous with both time and talent.

In times of upheaval and social challenge the church is a place that people know they can find support, validation, challenge, companionship for the journey, spiritual growth, learning opportunities, and help.

This is a time of reckoning. We stand amidst the crumbling social experiments of mediocrity and greed. Our world has been challenged. We're thrown back to thinking about what is of real value. We're forced to think about what really endures and what brings us joy. If prosperity didn't work – if decades of free time didn't work. If modern individualism didn't work what brings joy to the human heart?

I think that being honest with ourselves brings us happiness. I know that each time I fill out a pledge card it brings me satisfaction. I know that I'm spending intentional money on my values. There's no other place in society where I can put my money to work in such a way that I can invest in all my highest values and principles rolled into one. Care and nurture of young people, creating opportunities for intellectual and spiritual discovery, justice making, community building, lifelong learning, mutual comfort, speaking aloud about the kinds of beliefs that create both freedom and respect, supporting and enjoying music and the arts not simply for display but for entering into, creating a just workplace, creating a living model of a just and loving community that

can, by its example, teach the world around it a better way, teaching theologies and ethical systems that liberate persons and make life better for humans and all other life. Sharing holidays, humanness, finding affirmation, asking important questions, living into the answers, supporting a larger movement that brings a unique and positive presence to the religious scene and honoring a tradition that has included and continues to include people who change the world for the better – from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Dorothea Dix, Florence Nightengale, Theodore Parker, Joseph Priestley, Susan B. Anthony, Frank Lloyd Wright, Dr. Seuss, Rod Serling, Debra Haffner ... I could go on – but you get the idea.

When I opened my relatively young retirement fund statement a few months ago I saw that I had lost a lot of what had not be a whole lot of money. My first thought was gee – maybe I should be investing in the church instead... Rather than putting money away for retirement that seems to be loosing value – maybe I should invest where my values are -- here. The same money would make amazing things happen here.

Unitarian Universalists haven't been known to be great givers -- I think in part, while we're curious and like to ask questions – we're afraid to ask questions about money. We too often fancy ourselves like lone rangers – we ride up to church with our answers in our saddle bags and ride away again. But we actually need one another. The rugged individualism of previous generations no longer really works for us. We want community and a sense of belonging. We need places where we can explore life's meaning and find kindred spirits to do it with us. We need meaningful work – not always exciting work, but rooted in service to others. We get joy out of being of use. We need work that gives us a sense that our living here will leave a legacy behind us – whether we are wealthy or struggling to get by. We need to know that we count to other people and to let others matter to us. Both of those things bring us happiness.

It can be hard to pledge during a time of uncertainty -- but during a time of uncertainty it can be a source of happiness to know that we can commit to things which are certain and enduring.

Times of uncertainty are times to live in good faith. So at this time – as much as ever it is important to pledge to and support this place that rests upon values which are certain. And this time as much as ever it is important to Give what's right and not what's left.

Even if you are struggling if you can buy a cup of coffee you can give even a token amount to the church. It amazes me when people say that they can't pledge and then come back from a vacation. I know that simply by skipping Starbucks regularly you can afford to give something to the church if you are really stretched tight. If you are not struggling – but merely wanting that second or third of fourth TV I want to ask you to remember that it isn't going to bring you happiness. But if you see this congregation really come into its own as a voice for progressive religion in the Northwest Suburbs you will feel happiness. Imagine if you opened Consumer Reports and there was one of those charts with the major religions on it. And there was Unitarian Universalism. With wonderful ratings in the areas of democratic process, embrace of diverse theologies, affirmation of women clergy, progressive history, no hell, cushion seats, great music, illustrious history, superb architecture, stimulating conversation, commitment to social justice and social service reaching back generations and it's durable! Some people have been active Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists for many

generations. It can marry you, bury you and fight for your rights. So what's it worth to you? Similarly to buying a car it's only as good as you take care of it. Maintain and nurture the staff, who provide a center from which to work. Treat yourself and others with respect – like you would a new car. Realize that it can last many generations in your family, unlike a car. Unitarian Universalist churches have not asked for tithing – but perhaps we should. In any case we have begun asking for a token tithe – 2-3 per cent – more if you are ready. Stretch and step up...

Well, in the actual sermon on the mount Jesus spoke of some things that might come in handy now – for example – he said that the meek shall inherit the earth – meaning those who act with aggression will lose the world – and be lost to the world. He said that the poor in spirit will have the kingdom of heaven -- meaning that those who do not act with religious arrogance and those who approach their religious lives with genuine thirst and curiosity will discover wonder. Those that are mourning over their 401 k's – there may be some reassurance because there is a community of support waiting. And those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will pursue and find riches in the form of insight. This is Global economic crisis may, in fact, be just the wake up call that is needed for people to remember what is of real worth – to reconnect with our own wisdom.

It's in every one of us to be wise

Find your heart open up both your eyes

We can all know everything without ever knowing why

It's in every one of us by and by...

This is our by and by – this is our time to bring our fields of promise into reality.

Now is the time...