

**“Association Sunday”
by Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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This morning, I am feeling rich, wealthy, as though I am rolling in the dough. Why, I almost feel ready to challenge the philanthropic dominance of Bill Gates of Microsoft fame. Today we join with tens of thousands of other Unitarian Universalists in supporting our Association of congregations in a very targeted way. Later in the service, you will have an opportunity to support the Association above and beyond your support of this local congregation. In our time together this morning, I invite you to check in with yourself multiple times to see how wealthy you personally feel.

This is why I am feeling rich. If you have moved recently, you know what a financial burden it can be. Every service provider and landlord seems to want extra money just when it is hardest to come by – first month’s rent, last month’s rent, start-up fees for this, start-up fees for that. Fees for new checks with your new address – Don’t you think those fees are about the biggest rip-off ever? It all starts to add up, and the hassles can be aggravating. No wonder moving ranks right up there with death and divorce in terms of stress.

I arrived here just in time for the heat wave of up to 110 degrees which blistered the area. Imagine my concern when I received my first full month’s electric bill. I had not lived in a home with an air conditioner for six years, ever since I left Florida. It was anyone’s guess what this electric bill would be.

I flipped the unopened electric bill over in my hands. I decided to emotionally center myself before opening it. I figured that if centering oneself and meditating are good on a Sunday morning, they must be even better when one is about to open such a scary envelope! OK, breathe, center, breathe, center. When I was feeling centered, calm, and ready for whatever life might throw my way, I opened the envelope. “Welcome to Southern California Edison,” I read. “Based on an actual meter read, your usage was 9,260 kilowatt hours. Please pay total amount now due: \$2,617.46.”

Now, there are some people for whom the glass is always half full, and others for whom the glass is always half empty. People describe me as an optimist. If so, I can be a pessimistic optimist. That glass? Half full or half empty, I figure that it will be completely empty before long. ;) Therefore, it did not occur to me for a couple of days that the electric bill might be in error. My first thought was, “I’m going to have to camp in a park. I can’t afford both rent and electricity.” I wondered what you, the members

and friends of this congregation, would think about having a minister who lived in a tent. Would you be embarrassed? Would you be proud? Why did I have to be the minister to find this out? I wondered where the good parks were located in this area and how close or far from Montclair I should look. [pause] It surprised me how quickly I went to a place of feeling “I am poverty-stricken, and this proves it!”

I am happy to report that the electric bill was, in fact, a mistake. A corrected bill is on its way to me. I will not be camping in a park anytime soon. I am feeling rich, wealthy, rolling in the dough because I do not have to pay Southern California Edison \$2,617.46. *Wealth and poverty are rooted in objective reality, but generosity is rooted in subjective reality.* For me, it was a quick descent into feeling “I am poverty-stricken, and this proves it!” For me, the ascent into feeling, “I am wealthy, and this proves it!” is a slower, more tedious, and more rewarding process. It requires short-circuiting a panic response and cultivating gratitude.

I cultivate gratitude first thing in the morning, before I rise. While I am still only half conscious, I repeat this affirmation, which has been virtually unchanged for 15 years. I am willing to add more to it, but I cannot think of anything it lacks. This daily affirmation is part of my spiritual practice for cultivating generosity. I say to myself:

“Thank you for a warm, safe, dry, clean, quiet place to sleep last night. Thank you for the blessing of sleep. Thank you for family and friends. Thank you for Unitarian Universalism, Ken Wilber, Krishnamurti, and all the spiritual teachers who ever talked. May I be kind, especially to children, dogs, strangers, bad drivers, and people who play their music too loud.” That’s it. It is a “thank you” to life for life. It begins with an acknowledgment of privilege, for to have a warm, safe, dry, clean, quiet place to sleep is, sadly, a privilege in this world. The middle part of the affirmation is an acknowledgment of responsibility. The religious insights from Unitarian Universalism, Ken Wilber, and Krishnamurti have shaken me up, rearranged my insides, and turned me from facing inward to facing outward. The last part of the affirmation is a petition. Whatever else I do or fail to do in life, whatever else I feel or cannot feel, *may I be kind.*

You *did* know this was coming back to Unitarian Universalism, didn’t you? When I talk about the religious insights of Unitarian Universalism, what do I mean? As your new settled minister, we will have many opportunities to talk with each other about this in the years to come. For now, in brief, I would put it this way: Religious insight may indeed be global, but congregational life is local. Moreover, we

“human merely beings” (in the words of the Unitarian poet e.e. cummings) need something between the local congregation and the realm of global religious insight. Unitarian Universalists have tried, with great exertion and with some success, to create a responsible and responsive religious infrastructure *between* the local and the global. We have created an association of congregations, a partnership of congregations, and I am proud of it and inspired by it.

Our religious ancestors feared that oppression was likely to occur whenever church hierarchy tilted too far away from the local congregation. Long may our congregations be on alert for any oppressive tilt toward centralized power! And yet, these days, I believe the greater danger is an excess of decentralized power and a failure to recognize that there is power in numbers of associated congregations. There are today about 1,100 Unitarian Universalist congregations. Two-thirds of them have fewer than 150 members. In the United States, fewer than a quarter million people identify as Unitarian Universalist, and even they are not all members of any particular congregation. There are about the same number of Unitarian Universalists today as there were in 1961, when the formal consolidation of the Universalists and Unitarians occurred.

There is a way that we can help turn things around! A few days ago, I met with half a dozen local ministers. During check-in, I introduced myself and pulled out the latest issue of Time magazine (this one, the October 15 issue, the one with breast cancer as the cover topic). “For the first time in 50 years, Unitarian Universalists are conducting a national advertising campaign,” I said. I passed the magazine around the table, and I felt proud that somehow, Unitarian Universalists had found the money to dangle this carrot in front of the readers of Time magazine. The text of the advertisement reads, “Is God keeping you from going to church? Maybe you’re uncomfortable with the idea of God – or at least someone else’s idea of God. Yet maybe you yearn for a loving, spiritual community where you can be inspired and encouraged as you search for your own truth and meaning. This is a church, you ask? Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.”

We live in a marketing-saturated age. Sometimes it seems as though every square inch of printable space is for rent to the highest bidder. We may, understandably, be ambivalent about “marketing” something as precious as our religious movement. Sometimes Unitarian Universalists imagine ourselves to be like Don Quixote, protecting the local congregation against the incursion of outside influences. Other times, we see ourselves as protectors of global religious insights against the incursion of local congregations. I believe that we need to shape and protect that which lies between the local congregation and the global

insights of scientists, saints, and sages. We need to shape and protect our association of congregations. By investing our time, talent, energy, and money, we can help shape our association of congregations.

If you are grateful for the difference Unitarian Universalism has made in your life, I encourage you to put cash or a check payable to the UUA inside the envelope found in your Order of Service. Every dollar of your contribution will be doubled. That is possible because commitments totaling \$500,000 in matching gifts have already been received from Unitarian Universalists who want Association Sunday to be a financial success, as well as a spiritual success. Of the money collected, half will go toward the national advertising campaign. One quarter will support Unitarian Universalist ministers of color. One quarter of the money raised in the Pacific Southwest District will come back to the District for growth projects. I encourage you to give \$50 to benefit our association of congregations – more if you can, less if you cannot. I have written a check for \$100. Better \$100 to the Unitarian Universalist Association than \$2,617.46 to Southern California Edison!

I wrote the check because our association of congregations has improved the quality of my life and the lives of others. The association has improved the quality of my life and the lives of others by helping me find a congregation when I have moved, by making it possible for me to participate in District and national affairs, by printing books which have comforted me and challenged me, by supporting seminaries and seminarians, by putting me through a rigorous ministerial credentialing process, which, among other things, has given me the utmost of confidence in other ministers and their gifts. The association of congregations has helped bring *us* together through the Settlement Office, which allows search committees and ministers in search to find each other.

In closing, generosity is often more about *feelings* of generosity than it is about checkbook balance. As I conclude by sharing a story, please write a check to the Unitarian Universalist Association and seal it in the envelope (or please contribute cash). You may need a pen. If you have a pen to loan to your neighbor, please raise your hand. The envelopes will be sent, without being opened, to Boston, to be gathered with other contributions to the “Now is the Time!” campaign to grow our movement. Please be generous and remember the importance of what stands between the local and the global. No contribution is too large or too small. If you do not have your checkbook, take the envelope home and mail it directly to Boston this week. Just think . . . you could be writing a check to Southern California Edison instead, and that would not nearly be as satisfying!

Now, as you prepare your contribution, hear the story of Abu Kassim's Shoes as adapted by Gail Forsyth-Vail, who drew upon original Persian and Arabic versions of the story.¹ As I tell the story, I hope to hear the rustling of people finding pens, the ripping sound of checks being torn from checkbooks, and the soft sounds of folding and sealing of envelopes.

Once there was a merchant who was known throughout Baghdad. He was a clever merchant, perhaps the richest in the city, but he was known everywhere for being a mean old miser. He never gave even one penny away, and his family lived in a house with no furniture and had only the poorest of clothing.

Abu Kassim's stinginess showed in the way he dressed. He wore a tattered and patched old robe and a headscarf that was so faded that no one could tell its original color. He was known most of all for his worn, patched shoes. He had had them for 20 years, seeing no need ever to replace them when they wore out. He simply had the cobblers patch them, until the shoes were just a mass of patches sewed on top of patches, and so heavy with all the extra leather that he could barely pick up his feet when he walked. When people heard his shuffling step, they said, "There goes Abu Kassim and his big heavy shoes. A tighter fisted man we have never known!"

One day, Abu Kassim made an unusually good bargain. He had purchased some lovely jars at a very good price and also some nice perfume with which to fill them. Leaving the jars on his windowsill, he went off to celebrate by having a warm soak at the public bath. When Abu Kassim came out of his bath, refreshed, he was amazed to find a brand new pair of soft leather shoes in the place where his had been. Thinking that someone had made him a present, he slipped on the brand new pair and walked away down the road. Not long after that, the chief judge of the town came out of the bath and looked for his brand new shoes. Instead, in the corner he found tattered and patched, smelly old shoes. The judge knew instantly who had taken his brand new shoes, and he ordered Abu Kassim to be arrested and brought into court. "Abu Kassim!" shouted the angry judge. "You stole my shoes, and now you must pay a fine of 500 coins or go to jail."

No matter how much Abu Kassim tried to explain that it was all a mistake, the judge would not listen. Abu Kassim left the court 500 coins poorer, carrying his heavy, tattered shoes by the laces. On the way home from court, Abu Kassim cursed the heavy old shoes and threw them into an open sewer. The shoes floated down the sewer pipes, from bigger pipes to smaller pipes. Eventually, they came to a stop, blocking the pipe completely. The pipe filled with sewage, and then it backed up into the streets and into

¹ See <http://uua.org/giving/associationsunday/16307.shtml>. The story is included in the resources available here.

people's homes. When the workers came to fix the problem, guess what they found? Abu Kassim's shoes blocking the pipe. Back to court he went.

“You and your shoes have damaged the whole town. I order you to pay 500,000 coins for the clean-up work,” said the judge. This was almost all the money that Abu Kassim had hoarded for all of his working life. “You may have everything I own,” said Abu Kassim to the judge. “But please write an order that allows me to disown any responsibility for what my shoes might do from now on!” Trying hard not to smile, the judge agreed. Abu Kassim was a different man after that. He paid attention to others, giving to the poor and helping his neighbors. He took proper care of his family's needs. And when his shoes wore out, he did not fail to buy himself a new pair! [pause]

In the days to come, let us consider the old shoes which weigh us down. Let us consider who is hurt when we are stingy. Let us nurture generosity in ourselves and others. May it be so!