

The Real Deal
By Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
April 18, 2010

Image management is everywhere: Tiger Woods, no doubt, had help from top-of-the-line image consultants. Job seekers wonder if a new outfit or a new haircut might help the job search. After all, there are economic consequences to poor image management, or so the inner voice of self-doubt whispers to us. Image is about wealth, resources, assets, financial security. Evidence is piling up: wealth must be the real deal. Wealth must be what really matters.

In 1860, the Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson had this to say about wealth:

“Wealth begins in a tight roof that keeps the rain and wind out; in a good pump that yields you plenty of sweet water; in two suits of clothes, so to change your dress when you are wet; in dry sticks to burn; in a good double-wick lamp; and three meals; in a horse, or a locomotive, to cross the land; in a boat to cross the sea; in tools to work with; in books to read; and so, in giving, on all sides, by tools and auxiliaries, the greatest possible extension to our powers, as if [wealth] added feet, and hands, and eyes, and blood, length to the day, and knowledge, and good-will.”

After these “articles of necessity” are taken care of, luxuries beckon. Emerson continues: “Every warehouse and shop-window, every fruit-tree, every thought of every hour, opens a new want to [a person] . . . It is of no use to argue the wants down: the philosophers have laid the greatness of man in making his wants few;

but will a man content himself with a hut and a handful of dried peas? He is born to be rich.”¹

Emerson meant rich in monetary wealth and rich in what we today might call “social capital” – access to culture and to the capacity to shape culture. So, if men and women were born to be rich, how exactly did they *become* rich? Emerson makes it sound simple: “In a free and just commonwealth,” he says, “property rushes from the idle and imbecile, to the industrious, brave, and persevering.”²

Speaking personally, I have not broken a sweat dodging rushing property, nor has such property ever rushed toward me! I suspect that Emerson was exaggerating to make a point. In fact, he was a preacher’s kid, and he had seven brothers and sisters. When he was just eight years old, his father died. His mother managed to make ends meet – just barely -- by taking boarders into their home. Even in 1860 (perhaps especially in 1860, as 250 years of slavery in the United States was about to end), property did *not* rush from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave, and persevering.

Meditators, yoga practitioners, and others are advised to pay attention to their breath as a way of paying attention to “what is.” When your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath. As Jacob Needleman observes in *Money and the Meaning of Life*, thinking about money is *at least as good* a way of paying attention to “what is” as noticing one’s breath. Paying attention to money can have the same effect and may be easier for some of us than paying attention to our breath.

Whether as a supplementary spiritual practice or as a fundamental spiritual practice, notice money – that symbol of potential impact on the world. Notice how money

¹ “Wealth” from *The Conduct of Life* (1860, rev. 1876), Ralph Waldo Emerson. See http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_3_Wealth.htm

affects you and your relationship with the world. Follow your breath, or follow your money. Better still, follow your breath, *and* follow your money.

Notice how you feel when the bank statement arrives in the mail. Notice how you feel when you get quarters in change – and you need quarters for the washing machine. Notice how you feel when you get quarters in change – and you do not need quarters for a washing machine. Notice how you feel when you write a check. Does it feel different to write a check to Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation for your pledge than it does to pay a parking ticket or a phone bill? If not, something is awry.

The real deal? The real deal is *not* image management. It is not wealth. The real deal is love. Not the tragic, romantic love of Romeo and Juliet, but affection and mutual support. In recent weeks, I have been reflecting upon love and money. As I mentioned two weeks ago, my dear friend Fred died on March 29. He was 82 years old. We met 31 years ago, in 1979. We worked for the same company, which transferred each of us (decades apart) from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Los Angeles. For the first time, I am responsible for shepherding someone's Last Will and Testament through the process of probate.

In the past three weeks, I have had to juggle two very distinct roles – that of a grieving friend and that of the Executor. Fred knew that the real deal was love. Allow me to share about his life and the choices he made about love and money. Much of what I have learned about love and money, I learned from Fred. [I showed photos of Fred as I shared some of his choices around love and money.]

In the next two weeks, you will be asked to make a promise (a pledge) regarding financial support of this congregation. That will be an opportunity for you to express your love. You do not *have* to drive a Ford Escort with over 95,000 miles

² Quoted in *Money and the Meaning of Life*, Jacob Needleman, Doubleday, New York, 1991, p. 262.

on it, just as you do not *have* to pledge 3% or more of your income to Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation. But if you do, you will support the real deal – love that makes a difference inside these walls and in the world beyond!

May we learn to distinguish image from reality. May we know that life's real deal is love. May it be so!