



Gifts

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A few months ago I attended a performance of *Carmina Burana* at Music Hall. The CSO was joined by the May Festival Choir for this performance. Now, I'm fond of the piece and familiar with it, so I was not prepared for what happened to me above and beyond enjoying it. During the performance I experienced one of those magical, mystical moments where everything comes together, including my own proximity, and I was . . . *transported*. It's as good a word as any to describe what I felt, but it comes only close. I was in the right receptive mode, the performance was exquisite and my body was simply insufficient to contain me. I was larger in experience than I knew myself to be in the quotidian life. I *was* the auditorium of Music Hall. I *was* the music. How can I tell you what this was like?

Hans Zimmer, an eighteenth century theologian, speaks of such numinous experiences that, "The best cannot be told. The second-best is misunderstood." Such ecstatic moments, he says, can be described only crudely, in common language, and as such, are never quite believable, nor believed. But that's not the point. There is more to the story. During my moment of transcendent bliss, which you just have to take my word for, I had a vision-- an insight of historical proportion. In my vision each member of the orchestra, at the same time he or she was translating the notes on the page into melody, contained the child who chose that instrument, who signed up for lessons, who practiced diligently, who decided to risk the potential poverty of a professional musical career. And each singer who stretched for a high note or blended a harmony, was also a history of scores of choirs, a sponge of countless lessons in rhythm, diction and tone, tremolo and vibrato. All of this, history and moment, occurred simultaneously.

I marveled at this confluence of talent and intention -- that each one of these histories culminated at that moment, for this performance. The insight was to me as joyful as

the performance itself. This map of many lives, including the patrons in the audience whose own histories and experiences had brought them as willing participants -- including the composer, the makers of instruments, the architects and builders of symphonic halls, the designers and makers of black gowns and suits, the printers of music, the librarian who keeps and catalogues the symphony's musical scores, the director who ran the rehearsals and led the performance -- were all a part of *my* experience, my magnificent joy.

All of this, like dreams, takes longer to tell than experience. Ecstasy, enlightenment, *satori* -- whatever name is used to attempt to quantify these indefinable experiences -- does not last forever; cannot last beyond our human capacity to contain it. But when my elation had ended, I was left with gentler, more enduring gift. It was the sure knowledge that somehow I must repay the universe for these unbidden, but welcome moments of grace; pay for them out of my own life.

What gifts -- what kind of barter -- have I given to others that might give them pleasure, much less transport? I asked myself. *What comparable gifts do I have to give?* When you ask yourself this question, I knew then, even as I asked it, the answer seems small in light of the gift received, but I have also learned *that* it isn't important; *that* doesn't enter into the equation at all. In the days that followed the symphony performance, I found myself enumerating my gifts as best I could, and I added, for this tally, a defining criterion that was about neither quality nor quantity. *It has to be a gift that gives me joy to give or, somehow, it doesn't count. The gift must please me to give.* What a strange idea.

When I hiked the Appalachian Trail, I joined a maintenance club, a group of local hikers who felt so connected to the beauty and the inspiration of the foot roads of that magnificent mountain trail, that they could do nothing less than ensure its continued pristine availability to others. We gathered monthly to pick up the garbage of less evolved members of the human species, to repaint the trail blazers when they became weathered, to trim limbs and to remove fallen logs. We worked very hard and tried to tell one another of the best and the second best things about our mountain experiences.

But this new insight on gifts was not that sort of one-on-one, pay-for-services-received gifting, although I believe that kind is important as well. It was a question of tallying long-term and historic gifts. What have I paid for my precious life? What am I willing to give? What gives me such joy that the only thing I can do is to share it? I felt the need to iterate the inventory.

I love to laugh and I know that I can bring laughter to others. Laughing is one thing; but laughing with someone more than doubles the joy. I love ideas and words and I

am so blessed to find a calling that allows me to make a gift of that part of me. I have an obsession with color, a deep need for it. I sometimes blame it on the years when I found it necessary, as a woman manager in a company of men, to keep a low profile and let my work alone speak for me. For 15 years I was a beige mouse, with brown hair, who dressed mostly in tan and brown. And when I quit that job I broke out in color; and I find such delight in bringing color to the world one quilt, one jacket, one painted wall at a time.

This is not hubris, this tallying of gifts. I think this is an important kind of inventory for us all. It isn't about blowing your own horn, unless blowing a horn is one of your gifts. It's about accounting for your life; taking an audit; balancing the books. Doing so is itself a gift. When we understand what we have to offer, where our hearts are open and how our mode of operation becomes one of sharing, we find we aren't alone, we aren't alienated, we are still growing, we are co-creating our universe. And, when we find ourselves in a place just right, a place to offer our gifts in the company of others, we discover the same magic as we find in compound interest. (I count compound interest as one of the more magical, mystical experiences in life. Think about it. You get back more than you give.)

I know how important is this idea of doing what you love, sharing the center of yourself. And I know you know. I see you doing it every day. I see the choir, a group of people who love music and offer up their gifts of song, however grand or limited, for the sheer bliss of doing it – never mind the hard work. I see people in the kitchen of the Ellen Hall Room feeding multitudes, not because they have to, or feel guilty because they have more than some, but because of the pure pleasure it gives them. I see people in the pulpit who have no intention of going to seminary, who have no responsibility to make the Sunday morning experience a good experience for you, but who nevertheless work very hard, with great satisfaction to do so. And I see people writing cards, visiting hospital rooms, driving people to doctor appointments because they can and because it gives them a sense of satisfaction to share their gifts. These are just of your gifts being offered. Jean Trumbauer, author of *Shared Ministry*, say, “Our giftedness includes our personality type, interests, motivations, life experiences and our hopes and dreams.” They are, when given and shared, the equivalent of a *Carmina Burana* happening every day, right here, because of you -- all of you. When you give something on your own, it's a melody. When we give ourselves together, it's a symphony.

Now here's where my message is about to descend, gently, but realistically, from the sublime to the ordinary; from the mystical to the mundane. We have been the First Unitarian Symphony for a long time. Lately, we have been rehearsing with the First Unitarian Festival Chorus. The Chorus, the members who have joined us in the past

five years, all have new music. The rest of us have been using old scores or playing and singing by ear. Today, and from now on, we will all be playing from the same composition. This is can tell and you can understand.

Our volunteer coordinator, who is currently Ray Sinclair, but will soon be someone else with a comparable gift, has been interviewing each and every new member and making suggestions where they might get connected at First Church. He has been, with their help, discerning their gifts and opening doors of opportunity for them. He has been helping them find a place to bestow their gifts. In addition, he has been quantifying his interviews by entering the information he gleans into the church database – the same program from which we get our calendars and our directory and much, much more. But here's the thing. While this program has created great opportunities for some people to follow their bliss by giving, it has created a class society within this beloved community. There are the haves – those people who have been interviewed and are known -- and the have-beens – known only by people who know personally. That used to be enough. But we have outgrown our capacity to know everyone and their gifts.

But never fear. Shared Ministry is here. By our gifts we shall be known. Let me tell you how this is going to work. Along with the change in the governance model we propose to use from now on – a model that works better in a larger congregation, a program church, which we have now become – we have been introducing the concept and the program of shared ministry. The two go hand-in-hand. You knew it first when as CC/PC I started creating position descriptions for every committee, task force and job, including the board. You know it if you have been recruited by letter for a new task or committee. You will know it by the way it recognizes what people *want* to offer as a gift, rather than being coerced into service by shaming them into filling positions where a warm body is needed. When the church database is completed and opened for use, we will be able to know people not only by their presence and their smiles, but by their gifts. And we will be able to make opportunities available for people to pay blissfully for their lives. It will be, to continue my introductory metaphor, the harmony that supports the melody of the work we do here.

The Shared Ministry Committee tried to introduce small meetings to gather this information and while some of you attended, we realized we would be a long time explaining and gathering. So this morning I have your music. We will all be singing and playing from the same score from today on. In a few moments, committee members, Barb Rider, Tom Rohrer, Larry Pytlinski and Susan Boydston will be passing out these forms – and pencils, if you need them – and you will have an opportunity to make a brief inventory of your precious, sharable gifts. Even if you are

one of those whom Ray has interviewed, or one who has attended a Shared Ministry meeting on gifts, please fill out a new form. It is a simple check-off and should not take you long. The itemized list of gifts has been changed since you were last consulted. If you want an interesting exercise -- if you have nothing better to do -- you try to compile a list of useful gifts that everyone agrees with. For brevity's sake, this list may not be self-explanatory to everybody. If you need help or want to talk with someone about it, those people I mentioned will be in the lobby with me after the service to help you.

Put your name on the form and when you leave, you may drop your inventory into the box available as you leave the sanctuary, or hand it to a Shared Ministry Committee member after you have talked with them. Do not leave the sanctuary when you are done, or you will miss the rest of this service. A little filling-out-forms music, if you please Ms. Chen.

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You probably will not see the results of this exercise immediately. We are in the process of planning for the future. But, it is the near future as well as the distant. At any time you may request and redo a gifts inventory form. If you are not asked to participate with your gifts, it is not because they aren't useful or necessary. We are also intending to institute a jobs-available program so you don't have to wait to be asked. Currently, the most obvious period of recruitment is just before we vote on who will become new members of the Board of Trustees. We would like to make every task, every position of the church community as visible and opaque as that annual ritual.

I really want to stress that in an organization as large and as complex as ours, we cannot afford to maintain the attitude that small churches and fellowships must utilize -- which is *Someone has to do the work and it's your turn*. When you are busy with other areas of your life, when you are tired and on the verge of burnout, when you are in a period of renewal because you have nothing, at this moment, left to give, you have to utilize the musical term, a *rest*. Not all instruments play all the time; not all voices are required on every line of music. We truly want to give you the experience of offering yourself, your time and your talents as a gift, both here and outside these walls. I really want you to start thinking about yourself as a gift to your world.

To continue Sharon's message of last week, the shadow side of narcissism is saying, "But I'm not as good as she is, so I'm not going to offer to do this." Modesty is not required when living your life to the fullest. We play such beautiful music together. I want you to be a part of the orchestra, the chorus or the audience whenever you possibly can. I want you to have the opportunity to be open to the gifts available to you here for as long as you are here.

