

Two Copper Coins: A Sermon about Effort

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UU Church of Meadville

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

The Saturday before Mother's Day in 2012, I received flowers; a cheerful and lovely yellow and white Spring bouquet in a scalloped glass vase, delivered to my porch in Pittsburgh. The flowers were a happy surprise from my daughter, Michaela, then a college student out in Oregon.

I brought the flowers inside and pulled out the card from the small Oliver's Flowers envelope. It read: "Happy Mother's Day. I am so "greatful" for all you do. Love, Michaela." I smiled and sighed, because I was touched, because I knew she couldn't really afford to send flowers, and also because the word grateful was charmingly misspelled, as "G-R-E-A-T-F-U-L."

This reminded me of the sign over her 3rd grade classroom door that read "M-I-S-T-E-A-K-E-S welcome here." I took the card as a reassuring affirmation that I had done a good job at mothering, even if I made some mistakes along the way. Let's say, I got an "B+" for effort.

Throughout the ensuing week, I so enjoyed those flowers, residing at a place of honor on my dining room table, and then Saturday rolled around again. And, wouldn't you know? A bouquet of flowers showed up on my porch again, same vase, same arrangement, and same card. How did I know? "G-R-E-A-T-F-U-L"

I took the flowers inside and called Oliver's Flowers to report the mistake and to ensure that Michaela would not be charged. "Oh no," they assured me, just a computer glitch. Must have put the order in as a repeat. Just keep them."

So, the new flowers replaced the old, and the second card found its way to the fridge front, held in the same magnetic clip as the first. And a week passed, and well, you guessed it...more flowers, same card, same phone call. The flowers stopped after this, but the impact lingers. Should I have been annoyed or just "G-R-E-A-T-F-U-L" myself to the Universe for reminding me that my effort, my 2 cents worth (mistakes and all) may have actually been worth three weeks worth of flowers?

I went the gratitude route, and my somewhat surreal experience that May lead me to more deeply appreciate the effort of the woman in The Parable of the Widow's Mite, a scriptural classic that's been sliced and diced with every possible theological blade to expose its central message. Does this Parable from Luke sound familiar to you? Does it seem obvious in its moral and symbolism?

Having been privy to such dissections in Divinity School, I can say that it's not as straightforward as it may seem to discern the "central message" of this parable of a poor widow who places two copper coins (a fortune to her) in the treasury.

Let's consider the options. First, the coins she tossed in were probably *leptons*, the smallest Jewish copper coinage. (a penny). So, are we to take away an admonition to be generous, even in our "poverty?" That would be an obvious and satisfying conclusion and not exclusively Christian by any means. Without looking very hard, we can find examples in the most of the world religions – *zedak* in Islam, *zedakah* in Judaism, *dana* in Buddhism, and so on.

Perhaps, when we reflect upon this parable, we are expected to consider the true rewards of faith – greater than gold and silver? That’s certainly a prevalent theme in the parables and world religions, as well.

Neither of these interpretations are spiritual time-wasters. However, I like Dr. Henry Everett’s take on the tale. Henry was a parishioner of mine in Reading, MA in 2000– he was a kind, intellectually nimble man; a psychiatrist with a soul, who loved to figure things out, including the Parable of the Widow’s Mite.

Henry zeroes in on something else entirely, something unexpected and quite intriguing in a chapter from his fine book, From Adversity to Invincibility.

“[The widow’s] effort is the standard,” Henry tells us. Her effort. In other words, the action rather than the amount is significant. “Doing what you can is enough. Do not compare your achievements with those of others. You can sensibly rate yourself only by how well you apply your available resources – mental, physical, economic, and social.”

This parable (at least for today in this time and place) is essentially about *effort* and about how it is the *attitude* with which we throw in our two cents worth that counts. Yes, outcomes matter, but we cannot predict them or guarantee them. Mistakes happen, too, because we are human. Our mistakes do not nullify effort.

“The present is the only thing over which we have command,” writes Dr. Everett. The end product is not insignificant. Yet, the effort is the only standard we can realistically apply.

So, if the effort is the standard, how might we define “effort” religiously? As I see it, effort can be divided into two major categories: exertion and intention, and we find examples of these aspects in several of the world religions.

Usually, when we think of effort, we first imagine exertion -- blood, sweat, and tears, pushing the ball up the hill, chopping wood and carrying water, crawling on your knees to the Holy Land, and so on. There’s nothing wrong with breaking a sweat spiritually and there’s nothing wrong with striving for excellence. In fact, I recommend it. Nobody ever rises to low expectations. Henry would say that when we strive for excellence we’re exercising what he calls our “instrumental natures.”

The problems arise when religious exertion is misdirected. I’d argue that the most notorious example of this maligning of a positive religious exertion is the pillar of Islam known as *jihad*. The Islamic idea of jihad is derived from the Arabic root meaning “to strive” or literally, “to make an effort.”

Many of us cringe, though, when we hear this word because it has been misappropriated by Islamic extremist to mean “holy war,” and has come to be inextricably linked with terrorist activity.

This is unfortunate, as you may be surprised to learn that although jihad means “exertion for God,” it was originally intended as a **nonviolent** struggle for justice and inner peace. In fact, the mystical Sufis popularized a tradition describing the *inner* jihad as more significant than any *outer* jihad.

Yet, since Islam focuses on the welfare of society and humanity, rather than the boundaries of the individual, a person cannot keep improving herself in isolation from what happens in the world at large. And neither can we.

To apply this Islamic idea to our Unitarian Universalist congregation, I’d suggest that we balance our exertion for personal spiritual growth with our efforts to nurture and preserve this institution and build up the wider community. We strive to deepen our

spirituality and we exert ourselves in service to others. We throw in our two copper coins; our two cents worth. Inwardly and outwardly, the effort is the standard.

The Buddhists take this idea a step further by using mindfulness to discern the moral quality present in an action's roots before it is even performed. This way, one can determine if an action about to be performed will be skillful or unskillful. These skillful acts, or *skillful means*, are constructive and life affirming. They lead to a sense of ease and happiness. The widow in the parable seems contented in this way, doesn't she?

I'd quibble with Jesus over one detail, though. In my view, the widow gives not from poverty, but rather from a greater abundance than the rich folk surrounding her. Like Lawrence Kushner's father in the reading earlier, the widow seems not only content with her *portion*, but she's willing to give it away. This is, indeed, skillful means with enormous moral quality. Her effort is the standard.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard poses an intriguing question about the Widow in his *Parables of Kierkegaard*. He writes:

"Take the story about the woman who placed the two pennies in the temple-treasury, but let us poetize a little variation. The two pennies were for her a great sum, which she had not quickly accumulated. She had saved for a long time and then she had hidden them wrapped in a little cloth in order to bring them when she herself went up to the temple.

But a swindler had detected that she possessed this money, had tricked her out of it, and had exchanged the cloth for an identical piece which was utterly empty - something that the widow did not know. Thereupon she went up to the temple, placed, as she intended, the two pennies, that is, nothing, in the temple-treasury: I wonder if Jesus would not still have said what he said of her, that "she gave more than all the rich?"

I think Jesus would have adored her even more, as it's *absolutely* the widow's "intention" as a basis for her "action" that makes her noteworthy to Jesus in the first place. He's not impressed with her money, he's inspired by her faithful effort.

Let's turn to Hinduism for a moment, where we find this principle in what's known as Karma Yoga or Seva...the yoga of Gandhi among others... in which the fulfillment one derives from serving others has nothing to do with what is received, and everything to do with the way in which one gives. Maybe Jesus really did spend those "lost years" in India as some suggest.

I can't imagine that Jesus would actually care if the widow's cloth was empty or not. In fact, several scholars have noted that Jesus watches *how* the multitudes cast money into the treasury. He's not so much concerned with what they gave, but how they gave it. Think of what we say to our children, aphorisms like: "it's the effort that matters," "you get an A for effort." "Mistakes welcome here... Just do your best, dear."

Jesus saw the attitude of the soul. The rich gave their leftovers. The widow gives herself. Her effort is the standard. Like Mother Teresa has said: "Don't look for spectacular actions. What is important is the gift of yourselves." And, this applies to us, here at the UU Church of Meadville, too, as readily as it applies to the widow in the Temple.

Our stewardship campaign is winding down. Have you tossed in your portion? What gifts do we bring here? To our relationships? to the world outside these walls? Are we stuck in scarcity thinking? If so, how might we share both the spirit and substance of abundance? Do you feel like a "rich person" beyond the face value of pennies?

And what gifts might we be willing to receive in order to make us more alive with gratitude, like those unexpected repetitious flowers on my doorstep? The effort is the standard.

At times, we give ourselves through the simple effort of being fully present. Woody Allen once said that 80% of life is showing up! Sounds about right to me. Yet with all the distractions and to-do lists, the incessant traumas happening around us and the social media time drain, being intentionally and mindfully present is more challenging than ever.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, when a prophet is called, the answer is “Hineni,” a Hebrew word meaning “Here I am.” It means not just existing, but being fully present, expectant and willing to engage.

Many scriptural memories echoes around that simple word. When God called to Abraham, telling him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, Abraham said, "Hineni. Here I am." In addition, later, when Abraham and Isaac walked together up the mountain, Isaac said, "Father," and Abraham answered in the same way he had answered God, "Hineni. Here I am."

When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses answered, "Hineni. Here I am." When he was called to prophet-hood, a once reluctant Isaiah finally responded “Hineni. Send me.” As a young boy sleeping in the Temple, Samuel responded to God's call, saying "Hineni. Here I am."

The Maccabees who stormed down from the hills to reclaim the temple in the Hanukkah saga also proclaimed their own courageous Hineni.

And then, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a child, she, too, answered, "Hineni. Here I am. The servant of the One.”

In the past, when I've been asked about my “call” to ministry, I've replied, “I've been called many times, but luckily I had call waiting!” When we are called to engage, to be present and intentional, to make an effort, we might be inclined to think, “Well, ok, maybe me, but just not now, not when I am so busy, not when there is so much else to which I am already committed.”

This is about where many of us are right now, overstretched, over committed, and wondering if we've said, "Here I am" a few too many times already. Yet the deeper question is, have I said it enough? And, have I said it to the right things? Saying “Hineni” expresses a willingness to open yourself to the experience being offered, to open your heart to what or who is calling to you. Listen for that call, pick a passion, and throw in your two cents worth. The effort is the standard.

If this all sounds too much like a three-easy-steps, do-it-yourself in an afternoon, spiritual craft project, let me assure you (having worn the hat of parishioner, lay leader, staff member and minister), I recognize that the effort inherent in giving ourselves, being present, showing up, exercising our instrumental natures, etc., etc... is not easy nor is it without risk.

As Henry Everett points out in his book, “Effort carries the risk of failure. That is why some people can't bring themselves to make an effort in the first place. They want guaranteed results ahead of time.”

In other words, they say, “Here I am, and how does the story end?” Or “Send me, but make sure you include a return ticket.” We may be willing to undertake a *jihad* for some cause, but we may want to know if it will be worth it before we mount up. We may

wonder if skillful means will lead to measurable ends. This is not surprising given the achievement-oriented, “quantifiable” society we inhabit.

Yet, Henry reminds us: “The effort is the standard. Effort is an enlightened gamble (a leap of faith, as it were) in which there is a reasonable possibility of success. One could argue that effectuating positive outcomes begins with effort and boils down to enthusiasm – a word that means “possessed by God.” If our efforts embody our enthusiasm, then they articulate the attitude of our souls.

Our children’s story, “Bennie’s Pennies” is essentially a story about effort, isn’t it? He has five coins, rather than two, and he spends them to express his gratitude for his family. His thoughtful and intentional *effort* is most definitely the standard.

You may wrongfully believe that your two cents isn’t worth much. Just two little leptons tossed in the treasury of Universe. But this is not true. My two cents, it seems, was worth three weeks of Mother’s Day bouquets. I answered Hineni to the call of motherhood, and yes, there were lots of times when I felt my contributions went unnoticed and unappreciated, yet I have been rewarded, not for being the best mother or minister ever, but for my good, true, and sustained effort.

How about you? Your two cents, your two copper coins, shiny or tarnished; well, they are your portion, your nobility of spirit, and thus, they are worth their weight in gold. Toss them in!

Hineni. Here we are. Send us. We’ll strive to be grateful (GREATFUL) and we’ll give it our best effort.

Blessed be and Amen.