

## "What Would You Pay for Values?"

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While I live and serve a congregation in the Vancouver area, I make my home in a small neighbourhood not far from Stanley Park, in the westest of the West End, which is the downtown where all those glass sky-condos are. It's one of the densest neighbourhoods in the whole country. Many who live there walk everywhere they need to go. Many more ride bikes both for leisure and transportation. A good half of the metropolitan population who need to go to the mountainous North Shore from the rest of the city must drive through this bottleneck to get to the bridge, as I have to. One quickly realizes the walkers, cyclists and drivers speak different languages that barely translate.

I actually walk a fair bit in town so I'm bilingual, fluent in both Walk and Drive. If I also cycled and roller-bladed, I could apply for grants as a multi-culture project. I'd offer automotive literacy to those who only speak 'walk' or 'bike.' There are barely concealed hostilities all the time between these cultures, and it's not uncommon to hear verbal fisticuffs break out not just on street corners but even mid-block. I won't go into the gory details, but curses are cast on a regular basis. I bet this happens around here, too.

I use the word 'cultures' to describe the different perspectives and mentalities of these transportation-defined groups, but what's really going on is a clash of values. Each group grounds itself in positive values. For instance, as a walker I'm willing to pay more for housing to have access to the value of healthy exercise every day, rain or shine—that's the theory anyway. A cyclist might value freedom and be willing to pay more for speed and autonomous travel. A driver might focus most on raising children with access to the environment in their own backyard and be willing to pay more for the flexibility to take the best job available wherever it is.

Each of these cultures also projects negative values onto the others. Walkers are narcissists who think they always and everywhere have the

right of way, so they cross a street at any point without looking either way. Cyclists are egoists who disdain any rule or law that would slow them down, so you could be mown down on the quietest of streets by one flashing by like lightning, that is if they even have a bike light; bikes and cyclists are visible in the dark just by the glow of their virtue! Drivers care nothing for the environment, hop in their car to go a block to the McDonald's drive-through and probably bathe in tar sands oil. Talking together about their positive values, which would often overlap if identified, is rarely done, but it would be so helpful.

It seems we're inundated with cultural divides these days—no doubt each of you has your most glaring example in mind—and we know it can be crazy-making if not destructive to talk much about them. So I'm not going to... except for one... the one that most troubles and alarms me, which I also think is relevant to us. It's safer to bring up here because most of us are on one side of this divide, and it's going on most publicly in another country. So far, that is, as it's also close by and all too influential.

I'm speaking of the right/left divide in the United States, which has always been present but is erupting volcanically in recent years. And I'll reiterate that I believe it is relevant to us as Canadian Unitarian Universalists. But, be glad that I'm not writing a Walrus article on it; I'll barely skim the surface and I will soon bring it back to our here and now.

I listen to several current affairs podcasts that give me deeper understandings of the world: Canadian, international but particularly US-based. Many of you remember Pierre Eliot Trudeau's metaphor that Canada's proximity and relationship to the United States are too much like a mouse living beside an elephant: no matter how friendly the elephant, the mouse "is affected by every twitch and grunt!" Talk about twitching and grunting!

In 1998, then First Lady Hilary Clinton quoted the idea of a "vast, right-wing conspiracy" rumbling underneath American society and politics. I for one rolled my eyes, but the fact is this has been and is true. Just one example, in my mind, is the quiet dismantling of an effective public education system,

leaving a population woefully unaware of history, unready to deal with truth, unable to bring analysis to current social and political events, increasing the eliteness of the elite and reducing the access of those with little access. A truthful look at US democracy easily concludes that the country has *never* wanted every person to have the right to vote, and progress towards this is being turned backwards. Most of you will have other examples to bring to mind.

My point, however, *today* is to consider the money. Immense amounts have been raised over many years from conservatives, the super-rich to ordinary citizens, to support long-term right-wing goals. For instance, one of my favourite podcasts is a National Public Radio production called *On the Media*; it examines the media itself, both how it is structured and supported; how it both influences and is influenced; how it covers stories from particular angles, as well as how it ignores or distorts others. It's incredibly informative. Recently, they did a three-part series about one conservative fund-raiser who, over decades has been able to influence the formation and selection of US Supreme Court judges; his name is Leonard Leo. I hope I've tantalized some of you enough to look into this podcast and story yourselves, as the details of it are beyond us this morning. The point, as I said, is the money.

The funds pour in because of the intense devotion all those donors feel towards a vision they have for the future. A future built upon their values. A future which they hope to control. This is the dank, bleak side of generosity: the idea this congregation is both examining and in need of this year, last year, next year, every year. Can we compete in any way with this kind of generosity?

Yes, we can when we focus on a vision of bringing our values into higher relief with greater means to affect our world.

When any of us not born UU first comes to a Unitarian service, we are expressing a value we hold, though often we only perceive it through something that we need or yearn for. I come seeking spiritual community, a deeper life after having suddenly woken up from a semi-conscious daze of

self-centeredness and distraction. I want more relatedness in my life, not just a relationship but a broader sense of connection with people, and not just with particular people but with humanity. Perhaps what I mean is what's human in other people; human-ness itself.

If we think back to who and how we are when we first come here, whether recently or decades ago, I believe that we have at least one value in our hearts that expresses the inner self, defines our deepest longings, reveals our most urgent need, or calls out for our most passionate devotion. Rather than the word 'value' we might experience it as our vision; our hope. Whether we find just what we are seeking, or something less or different or much more, still now values, vision, hope or all three draw us back.

Whether known or not, or understood or not, our mutual presence echoes or satisfies in some way the values of others who come here. Each of us is part of what we each are seeking; part of their solution, just as they are of yours.

Whether you or the congregation has known or expressed it in the past, together and separately we must know it now. That future of both possibility and challenge that lay potentially ahead of us then is happening now. In times of difficult decisions, it may help us greatly to disclose our values *first* when consulting together about what action we as individuals support the community taking.

We can start today identifying our values to each other: the ones that most motivate us in our lives; the ones that most draw us to this community; those we want more of; those we aspire to with either hope or discouragement. The story during Time for All Ages that Angela chose for us today identifies at least Honesty and Perseverance as values that can expand our lives.

What values would we find in your story? What do they mean to you? How worthy are they of your effort and support? This is the time to consider them. To consider sharing them. And to decide how to support them.