

For What We Have, For What We Give

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, March 4, 2012

The pale polka dot is not unexpected. It sits, dinner plate size, in the center of a weed strewn and crumbling road. The dot's rough paint lies uneasily on decaying asphalt. It is something of a shock. A piece of art, rough hewn but art nonetheless, in the midst of urban blight.

The dot is not alone. Casting my eyes forward I see another dot about twenty feet ahead, washed out yellow instead of faded pink. That dot is followed by another, blue this time, and then another and another. Now I understand what the docent at the Detroit Institute of Art meant when I asked for directions, "follow the polka dot road."

I am driving through one of Detroit's poorest neighborhoods. The blocks I pass are filled with a mixture of the burned out shells of vacant houses, empty lots, broken bottles, abandoned furniture and occupied, but usually decrepit, dwellings. I am looking for the Heidelberg Project, the artist Tyree Guyton's outsider masterpiece. When I see the first polka dots I know that I am close.

As I travel down the street the polka dots gradually multiply and move. First they are only on the asphalt, barely holding together parts of the disintegrating road. Then they drift onto the broken buckled sidewalks and up the sides of abandoned buildings. The polka dots are everywhere when I finally turn off the main street and onto the side road where Guyton's project is centered.

The project is difficult to describe. It consists of more than a dozen houses stretched over a block and a half, trees decorated with glass bottles of all colors, a painted school bus, piles of shoes and a makeshift playground. Some of the houses are occupied. Several are abandoned. All have been decorated by Guyton and his neighbors in highly unorthodox fashions. One home is carpeted with numbers, big and little, that come from gas station signs, clocks and broken street signs. Another is covered with dozens of words--Oklahoma, people, jury, white, love--and parts from vehicles: hub caps, doors and steering wheels. A third is painted entirely in polka dots, some the size of a quarter and others bigger than a hula hoop.

Since its advent more than 25 years ago the Heidelberg Project has been a source of both controversy and pride in Detroit. Some people love it. Others hate it. Both Mayor Coleman Young and Dennis Archer tried to destroy it. First Young, and then later Archer, sent in bulldozers to tear down some of the houses.

Whatever people think of Heidelberg, whether they call it piles of trash or brilliant art, there is no debating that its impact is visceral. When I walk through it I feel like I am entering a magic realm. This is certainly Guyton's intention. He said of it, "This block is a very special place. It is like magic-land."

Magic alters reality. It is not supernatural. Instead it is a word for the way in which we use our imagination and will power to change the world around us. When we have an idea for something and then bring that idea to fruition we are committing an act of magic.

Heidelberg is filled with magic. Through his vision, and by nurturing the creativity of others, Guyton's art has transformed a desolate landscape into something wholly new. And that transformation has been more than visual. In the blocks immediately around Heidelberg crime has dropped. The drug dealers have largely left and a greater sense of community has been built. Magic indeed.

There are two lessons that I take from Heidelberg. The first is that art and imagination can overcome ruin. The second is that generosity can be transformative. These lessons are intertwined for art often stems from the generous impulse to make the world more beautiful. That impulse can help us survive when our existence seems painful and ugly.

Our theme for worship this month is generosity. The theme was chosen, as I am sure many of you are aware, because March is the month of our annual stewardship drive. Stewardship is tied to generosity. We want to be good stewards of what we have so that we can leave something behind for future generations. So stewardship is partially about giving gifts to people we will never know.

We all have received such gifts. When Bill Hutchinson died last June he was the last living charter member of this congregation. That means that for all of us this congregation is a gift that previous generations gave us. If we are good stewards we will give the gift of this religious community to generations to come.

Such gifts can feel risky. They include the giving of part of the self to another. When we give our money, time and skills to a religious community we are giving part of our selves. With this act comes both the possibility of acceptance and rejection. What if our gifts are not enough or not appreciated? What if they are not wanted? How do we feel then?

I experience this fear of rejection when I give things to my children. Take cooking for instance. I love to cook. One of the ways that I express my appreciation of and affection for people is by cooking them nice meals. Frequently though my children will have none of it. Usually, they prefer the macaroni and cheese that comes from a box to the macaroni and cheese that I make from scratch. When that happens then is I feel a little rejected.

In his meditation "Feeding and Being Fed" Robert Walsh reflects on the relationship between feeding others and generosity. He writes, "to feed [someone]--is to give life." There is no more generous act than the gift of life.

Later in his piece Walsh states, "The person who receives the gift of food gives a precious gift as well. It is the gift of trust, an affirmation of the life-giver." The trouble comes when we give a gift and automatically expect to receive one in return.

It is foolish of me really. The important thing is that I am trying to give a gift, trying to do something life sustaining. The outcome is less important than the intention. The giver, after all, cannot control the outcome. But the giver can set his or her intention. And that intention can be to give something that is life sustaining.

It is easy to forget this. Especially at stewardship time when people get anxious about their ability to give. It takes a lot of money and a lot of generosity to run a congregation. Everything that people

give is appreciated. Whether it is a \$5,000 pledge or some change in the collection plate every gift helps sustain the life of our religious community.

Just think about all of the gifts that go into a typical Sunday morning. Our worship is truly a collective effort. It requires many acts of generosity to create. The work of the welcome team sets a friendly tone for people as they enter the sanctuary. The worship associates provide much of our liturgy. The aesthetics committee makes sure we have nice flowers. Today the stewardship committee perfumed a skit that reminded us that generosity is part of the spiritual practice of many faiths. And that is not to mention all the people who contribute to our fellowship time after the service. There's Patrick who makes the coffee and Claire who oversees First Sunday lunch.

I am sure I am missing someone but that is not the point. The point is that we each give different gifts and that all of those gifts are important. Here I am reminded of a phrase popularized by the ever controversial Karl Marx, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." We all have gifts to give. We all contribute to the larger whole.

In this way our religious community is not dissimilar to the Heidelberg Project. The project is supported by gifts large and small. The children in Guyton's neighborhood have no money. Yet they are able to give the gift of their imagination and their time when they paint polka dots and figures alongside Guyton. Other people give Heidelberg large financial gifts that allow Guyton to make his living as an artist, the project to employ a modest staff and the surrounding community to benefit from a community center for arts and education.

There are other parallels between Heidelberg and a liberal religious community like ours. The theologian Rebecca Parker identifies several tasks for Unitarian Universalist congregations. Two she lifts up are prophetic witness and the preservation of endangered knowledge. Parker defines a prophet this way, "A prophet is one who is able to name those places in our lives where we are resisting what needs to be known, closing our eyes to what is really happening, silencing what the world is telling us."

When we think of prophets we usually think of the ancient Hebrew figures who went around Judah and Israel in sackcloth and ashes proclaiming gloom and doom. Such prophets are not the only kind. The news of the world, even in troubled times like ours when school children shoot each other in school cafeterias, is not all bad. One of the truths that we can forget is that we surrounded by beauty.

This is prophetic message of Guyton and the Heidelberg Project. His art transform trash and desolation into unexpectedly magical object. An abandoned dirty toy is not just a worn out piece of plastic. It is something that can be incorporated into an artistic vision.

In a Unitarian Universalist religious community we say this not about found objects but about people instead. In his well known sermon "Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven," Mark Morrison-Reed quotes the Universalist minister Gordan McKeeman who preached, "...Universalism came to be called 'The Gospel of God's Success,' the gospel of the larger hope. Picturesquely spoken, the image was that of the last unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable... to resist the power and love of the Almighty."

Morrison-Reed asserts that this image, “the last sinner being dragged, by his collar... into heaven” communicates that ours is “a religion of radical and overpowering love. Universal Salvation insists that no matter what we do, God so loves us that she will not and cannot consign even a single human being to eternal damnation.”

Guyton’s art has a similar philosophy behind it. Each gift that is given is something that builds the Heidelberg Project and strengthens the community. Both the little gifts that children bring and \$50,000 foundation grants are essential to the continuing life of the community.

This truth is one of the pieces of endangered knowledge that I suspect that Rebecca Parker calls for religious communities like ours to preserve. Everyone is important. Everyone can give to sustain the life of the community.

At stewardship time the gifts we talk about are primarily financial gifts. This is not to say that other gifts are not important. It is just, as I said earlier, it takes a lot of money to run a congregation. One of the reasons why we encourage fair share giving at this time is that we recognize that each persons gifts are important. By asking people to give a percentage of their income, rather than a fixed amount, we are making a theological statement. That statement is that we appreciate the generous intention behind all gifts and recognize the gift of self that they contain. Hopefully that means that you givers of the gifts experience an affirmation of the self as a result of your generosity.

If for whatever reason that affirmation is lacking generosity can still be transformative. It is the intention that matters most. Even when the affirmation is lacking, we can give anyways. Sometimes in this way we can become an inspiration for others.

Consider the story of Vedran Smailovic, better known as the cellist of Sarajevo. Twenty years ago, in the spring of 1992, there was a long line outside the door of one of the last bakeries in the city of Sarajevo that could still bake bread. At four o'clock in the afternoon a shell struck the bread line and killed twenty-two people.

Smailovic lived nearby and witnessed the event. Prior to the Balkan War he had been the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera. As Paul Sullivan wrote in Hope Magazine:

when he saw the carnage outside his window, he was pushed beyond his capacity to absorb and endure any more. He resolved to do the thing he could do best... Every day thereafter, at 4:00 p.m., Vedran Smailovic put on his full, formal concert attire, took up his cello, and walked out of his apartment into the battle that raged around him. He placed a little stool in the blood-stained, glass splattered crater where the shell had landed, and every day, for twenty-two days, he played Albinoni’s Adagio as tribute to the twenty-two dead. Snipers fired at him (they missed), mortar shells fell all around him, but he played music to the abandoned streets, the smashed trucks, the burning buildings, and to the terrified people still hiding in the cellars, who heard him...

It would be hard to argue that the bullets that flew around Smailovic were affirmations of his music. And yet his act of bravery helped strengthen the legacy of beauty in the world. His actions have become part of an inspiring story that reminds others that we never know where acts of generosity will ultimately lead.

I think of my own childhood. My mother, like me, used to make my brother and I macaroni and cheese from scratch. And I, like my children, used to beg for the macaroni and cheese that came from the box. Yet today because of my mother's culinary gifts I prefer homemade to processed food and am trying to pass the same gifts onto my children.

This brings me to a concluding point about generosity. It frequently stems from my gratitude. My own generosity is often inspired by the gifts that I have been given. I give to this congregation, and other Unitarian Universalist institutions, because of all of the gifts that our liberal faith has given me. And I try to give my children the gift of homemade food because I am appreciative of culinary gifts my mother gave me.

In this way I am not so different from Guyton. His efforts in Heidelberg stem from his gratitude for all that his community has given him. He started the project with his grandfather as an art school drop out. It was his way of saying thank you to the community for encouraging him in his art. And so that gratitude turned to generosity.

Generosity often begins with the spirit of this passage from e. e. cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blur true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

We give because of what we have received. We give as a way of saying thank you. We give seeking affirmation and we give risking our selves. Through the act of giving we say yes to beauty, yes to possibility, yes to life. And so may we all give generously.

Amen and Blessed Be.