

## TO YOU I GIVE

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell  
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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CALL TO WORSHIP (#443)

### MEDITATION

*In the generation before Dr. King, I can think of no one who plumbed the depths of the human spirit more profoundly than Howard Thurman. His book Meditations of the Heart would top my short list of writings for a desert island. Today's meditation speaks of how a dream can grow within us until it takes over our lives, and in time becomes embodied not just in our hearts but in a human institution shaped by our dream.*

*It's a meditation that may reflect his own experience. For in midlife, in 1943, he found himself called to leave the security of a tenured position as dean of the chapel at Howard University, to serve as founding co-pastor with a white minister he did not know, of an intentionally interracial new congregation called the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco. It held its first service, by the way, at the First Unitarian Church.*

*Let us be in a spirit of meditation as we share these words of Howard Thurman:<sup>1</sup>*

It is always miraculous to see a dream take shape and form. Dreams in themselves are made of the chiffon of our hopes, desires and aspirings. There may be no limit to their fabulous unfolding, rich in all the magic of the fantastic. A dream may be held at the focal point of one's mind and heart until it takes over the total process of one's thinking and planning, until at last we become the living embodiment of what we dream.

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<sup>1</sup>Restated in inclusive language from "A Man Becomes His Dream," in Howard Thurman, Meditations of the Heart (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976, reprinted from the 1953 edition by Harper & Row), pp. 41-42.

This is the first miracle: we become our dreams. Then it is that the line between what we do and are and our dreams melts away. A new accent appears in how we think, the signature of our dreams must guarantee the integrity of our every act. In some ways we seem to be possessed; and perhaps this is true.

The second miracle occurs when the outline of the dream begins to take objective shape, when it begins to become concrete and to take its place among the particular facts of life. This means that something more than we ourselves becomes the embodiment of the dream. Others begin to see the manifestation and to feel the pull of its challenge. In turn, through sheer contagion, they relate themselves to the dream and its demands.

If the embodiment takes the form of an institution it means that at the center of the institution there is a living, pulsing core which guarantees not only flexibility but a continuous unfolding in an increasing dimension of creativity. Hence those who have become embodiments of a dream, project an institution which becomes the embodiment of the dream which they themselves have already embodied.

It is of the very nature of such a dream that it continues to grow, to develop, to find ever more creative dimensions. Hence the dream is always receding; it can never be contained in a life, however perfect. So it is with the institution which is its embodiment. It must always maintain its dynamic character, and its greatest significance must ever be found in the new heights to which it calls all who share its contagion.

## READING

*Today we speak about our financial support of the church. Ministers often speak of this as the "sermon on the amount." So on the face of it, this is a*

*sermon about money. It may be appropriate, therefore, that we take our reading from a book about money – yet a book which points beyond money to what we do with it and the faith that guides us.*

*Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University. In 1991, he wrote a book called Money and the Meaning of Life. He brings a secular approach to a religious theme, as he talks about finding spiritual meaning in daily life.*

*I want to share with you this morning his closing words. They remind us how easily money becomes for us a medium for the expression of the ego, of our need for security and control over our lives. Only as we understand this, he says, can we get in touch with our deep spiritual longing for meaning and for love. As we do, we shall find that we don't have to escape to some other-worldly place to find it. We can make our spiritual "monastery" right here in this material world, as we cultivate a greater awareness of the choices we make with our money. Needleman writes:<sup>2</sup>*

There is in [humans] a wish that does not come from the ego. . . . It is an energy, a movement that exists outside of linear time. Only when you are ready to experience the complete breakdown of the ego without the slightest impulse to reestablish it again, only then will you experience the wish of [this higher force within us.] . . .

[Our great human need is to] discover a wish that is stronger than the ego, and to which the ego can assent. And when you are willing to see how you compromise everything of real value because of the force of money, then it is possible to [get in touch with] the higher forces within. The point is that, since money has entered so deeply into the formation of the contemporary

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<sup>2</sup>Jacob Needleman, Money and the Meaning of Life (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 296-98.

ego, then it is necessary for us to play the money game with our best abilities, but with a new intention. . . .

There is an action, an allowing, a surrender within, that has always been the birthright of every man or woman. The ego experiences it as a kind of stoppage. It is a special quality of silence. In that moment, you know why you are on earth and you know that as you are you cannot serve. You know you must change your life and that this can only happen by searching for companions and conditions that will support the appearance of this moment of opening.

On the basis of that moment, a new intention enters into one's life. . . .

One begins to understand that it is only through that opening that one can love as one wishes to love and as we have heard of love in the teachings of the masters. Then, truly, the world and life in this world, with all its pleasures and pains, with all its obligations and difficulties -- just this world that you and I live in now -- this world becomes my monastery.

## SERMON

I want to begin this morning where Needleman leaves off. Needleman writes from a secular perspective. He's a philosopher. But I want to say that for you and me, the best place to find this new intention in our lives is right here among ourselves. The *church* is a place where we can learn to understand how ego dominates our lives, how we can tame it, let go of it, and begin to use our money in the service of our deeper yearnings. The church is about just this, helping each other to discover our deepest yearnings, articulate and nurture our dreams, distill them into shared dreams, and make them a reality in the life we share and the world we serve.

So this is not, after all, a sermon on the amount. I'm not going to talk about money. Rather, it's a sermon about how we live our lives, about living from our faith in the abundance and goodness of life itself. It's a sermon about how we let go of those egos, let go of our need to control every aspect of our lives in order to give us security, and surrender to our dreams of what life *could* be like – if we could just seize that opening and live from our deepest intention.

It is not easy. It is hard to let go of our deep-rooted fear that it is up to us to find our way in the world alone. It is this feeling that so often gives our modern lives a drivenness, a feeling of being pulled in all directions, a feeling that no matter how much we try, how much we accumulate, it is never enough. We run faster and faster, caught up in the rat race of life, until, sometimes, our lives come to a grinding halt, leaving us exhausted and powerless and cynical.

As it affects the church, we respond, when we can, by cutting back on our commitment. Spreading ourselves thinner, cutting back the time we spend on the very life we have dreamed of. Saying no to leadership and participation, which so easily feel like work; coming to church only when we have time to spare, and begrudging anything over that one hour.

Since our money follows our time and interests, our money, too, gets spread thinner. We experience the stewardship appeal as one more demand, among the dozens that flood our mailboxes. At best, we may mutter, OK, what does it cost to renew my membership? Even as church leaders we succumb to that thinking. We'll tell you just what it costs to pay dues for you to our denomination, to bring you the *UU World*, and our own *Branches*. We say, here's the minimum you have to pay.

Well, I say, stop! That's a terrible misunderstanding of what the church is all about! It's looking at membership as "one more thing" we have to buy, one more demand upon an already frazzled life. If all we do as a church is add to your frazzlement, we should go out of business, and lighten your load. You don't need the dead weight of such a church, especially in these hard economic times.

The church is not a membership to be renewed, or even a charity asking for our money. The church is about relationship. Relationship with the deepest part of ourselves, and our dreams; relationship with other human beings; relationship with the earth and the heavens and the cosmos. The church is about nurturing these relationships. It's about growth. It's about depth. And all this can take place only in an atmosphere of community and trust – and constant dreaming.

We will experience this as we enter into the life of the church. We can experience it even as we take on the basic tasks of our church life -- the committee meetings, the cooking and coffee making, even the schlepping of tables and chairs -- as holy tasks of mutual ministry, undertaken in a spirit of love and service. And beyond these basic tasks, in all we do together, we're engaged in a common search for meaning, for connection, for challenges – challenges that draw us beyond our fears, that invite us to grow in the ways of compassion and service. In all these ways the church invites us to respond with a gut level YES! to the call of life. The ancient church father, Irenaeus, once declared that the glory of God is seen “in a human being, fully alive.” It's a life-long quest.

As we come alive in this way, our lives will take on focus. Our priorities will become clear. We can stop running faster and faster, doing more and more. We'll discover, with relief, that we can now discriminate between those things that contribute to living more fully, and those other things that simply pull us apart, or are at best redundant, leaving us exhausted yet not fulfilled.

Needleman calls these conflicting pulls on our lives the call of ego, which is to say, our drive to find meaning and security by constant striving for more doing, more money, more things, more control, more perfection. In the face of this drivenness, he says, our great human need is to "discover a wish that is stronger than the ego." How do we find it? We find it as we begin to let go of ego, let go of our conviction that our salvation lies in acquiring, doing, running, alone and afraid.

We must stop, be still and open our hearts.

We must cultivate the companionship of others in our search.

We must open ourselves to the joy and the pain of the world.

We must find our heaven here on earth, and our monastery in this very world we live in.

That's what Needleman says. What I want to add is that this is exactly what we are about right here in this church. Come on in. Reach out a hand. Join in the search.

Our lives are not a cup to be carefully rationed, but a gift to be given away, with loving abandon, as we say Yes! to life, as we nurture a lifegiving relationship with the deepest in life itself.

Our longing for this deeper dimension in life calls us to plunge in, take the risk of getting to know each other, and be known, as we let go of our doing and talking that shields us from having to listen; as we begin to hear each other's stories, and risk telling our own; as we discover that we are, each one of us,

already accepted, and don't have to earn it; as it sinks in that *nothing we do, or fail to do, can separate us from this love in which we live.*

As we let ourselves plunge into the life of the church, don't be surprised if we discover, over a period of time, that what we're about here in this congregation is more important to us than a bigger house, a better neighborhood, a more prestigious job. Don't be surprised if we find ourselves spending vacations at some of our (inexpensive yet lifegiving)UU summer conferences and retreats, and spending less on travel to far-off places. Don't be surprised if we find ourselves eating more church dinners and spending less at restaurants. Don't be surprised if our priorities begin to change.

Decisions like these are driven not by the church's budget, not driven by its need to survive as an institution, but by our own inner need. I firmly, absolutely, believe that the way to set our church's priorities is, first, to set our own priorities -- to decide how we're going to use the gifts we've been given – our time, our talents, our spiritual gifts. Only in the light of these decisions can we decide upon our pledges. And only after we've made our pledges, will we be ready to set our budget as a church. Because what we give is not about the church's need as an institution. The church is only a vehicle we use to respond to human need, which is utterly open-ended. The question of how much we give is about *our need, yours and mine, to become the giving people that we deeply want to be, and our longing to live out our dreams of living lives that are whole and meaningful.*

As we become the generous people we long to be, how do we decide how we're going to use our time and our talents, all the gifts we've been given and are now sharing, how do we decide what is it that we want to do together here at Paint Branch?

Churches in the “free church” tradition, like ours, are run from the bottom up. They are built on the concept of “covenant,” whether implied or explicit. We don’t have to agree in our beliefs. We come together out of our longing to know, and be known, by what we want to do together and how we want to *be* with each other.

Yesterday a large group of us came together to talk about just this, what we long for in this relationship. We made a beginning, talking about our longing for deep and whole relationships. We talked about the distrust and discomfort that sometimes stand between us, about broken relationships, about people we avoid, about things we find it hard to talk about. We talked about our longing to be reconciled with each other, as individuals and as groups, and to sustain these relationships. And we talked about the insights and skills that can help us to do this, here in the church and, indeed, in the rest of our lives. We named some of the things we’d like to see in this covenant that binds us together. The conversation is at least as important as the words we come up with, and the conversation, if you pursue it, will go on for a long time, maybe even from year to year into the future as you revisit whatever you come up with. It’s a process called reconciliation. It’s about relation building. And it’s how we get from where we are to the church we long to be, the church of our dreams, the church described in the vision statement we’re working on which we’ll be reading together after the sermon. Listen to this draft, and measure it against the longings of your heart.

The task of reconciliation and covenant building will continue, long after Phyllis and I are gone, if you decide to pursue it. But I think some basics are clear. We want to be a place where we are accepted for who we are. Not just for who we are, but for who we can be. We want to recognize each other’s gifts, and help each other to grow and become better people. We want, especially, challenge each other to grow in the art of caring for each other. We know it’s a

scary business, but want our church to be a place where we can practice our caring.

But it's not just about how we relate to each other, we who are already here. It's about how we relate to the community around us. It's about growing in the arts of hospitality, as we make room in our lives and our hearts for the "other" – the stranger, those of a different color, or ethnicity, those who speak differently, or look differently, those whose sexual identity or expression differs from ours, those who may be accustomed to worship in different ways, those who differ from us politically, those who don't have as much money, or work with their hands not just their heads, or who don't have jobs at all. We can do this only if we're ready, all of us, to *be changed by each other*. And that's a scary business too.

We want our church to be a place that helps us to understand other people better, and our whole world, a place that challenges us to see the world's injustice, and how we can respond to it.

And we want our church to be a place where we learn to take seriously the challenge of caring for our planet. Not just talk about how *other* people should change, but learn what *we* need to do. And this is *really* scary, because it means that we have to change the way we live.

If our church isn't about these things, it doesn't deserve our support. But if it is, then the only question is how we can best use the gifts we have to make these things possible, and how much we can afford to give. What do we *need* to give, to give life to our dreams, to bring meaning to our own lives?

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So when Paul Wester and his stewardship team come around to ask you to make some stewardship visits to each other, check that instinct to draw back. Think about what it is we're stewarding in this place, with each other. Think about what we do here, and what we could do. Think about the difference we make in each other's lives, and the difference we *could* make – among ourselves and in the world around us.

What Paul is asking us to do is not really to talk about money. It's to talk, with some of the people who are nearest to us and dearest to us – and people who we hope will become near and dear to us – about the things we hold near and dear together: About this church we love, and what we do and could do together. The money is almost incidental, because after we've talked about this church we love and these people we love and this world we love, we won't have to persuade, we won't have to convince, we'll hardly have to ask. We'll *know*, all of us, what we want to do. We'll know what we want to do with our time and our talents. And we'll know what we want to do with our money. We'll ask for that card, we'll pull out our pens and we'll write it down, so that together, we'll know how much we have to spend in this work we do. And we'll trust these people we love so much, to understand that if in these scary economic times we lose our income, it's OK for us to cut back. And that will be alright. For we're all in this together.

When I ran my first church fund drive, forty years ago, the professional fund raiser's advice was to "give until it hurts."

But today, I say, "give until it feels good."

From you I receive. . . We do not find our way alone.

To you I give. . . Like the bodhisattva, when we have found our nirvana, we are called to turn back, and reach out to our companions still searching.

Together, we share. . . both the search, and the work of justice which is itself transformative.

By this we live. . . With a new intention in our lives. Whatever hinders it -- let it fall away, and leave our lives focussed on our inner calling. Let us reach out, say YES! to life, and together, build the kind of church and kind of world we have dreamed of. AMEN.