



Stewardship: A Life of Caring

Sermon by Terri Willingham, Nov. 8, 2015

When I sat down to put my thoughts together for this service, I had that de ja vu feeling that I'd done this before. So I looked back through some old files and sure enough, there it was, a Stewardship Sunday service from about four years ago.

The service was part of our canvassing kick off, and focused largely on the spiritual and social value of our church experience in informing our daily lives, and the opportunity we have, during our canvass, to be good stewards of our spiritual home.

It is my UUness, I wrote at the time, that informs my relationships with my family and my friends, and compels me in my day to day work. It is by the very nature of our presence here, providing a place for us to come together on the common ground of our shared principles and the camaraderie of our shared sojourn that we make so much possible in our own lives, for our family and friends, our coworkers and people we meet every day.

We must be stewards of our church, I said, because at the larger level, by being stewards of Spirit of Life UU, we are being the stewards of our faith, of Unitarian Universalism.

As it was part of our canvass, I was talking largely about financial stewardship, the nuts and bolts care of utility bills, and cleaning, and equipment and building maintenance. And that's a very real and meaningful type of stewardship.

But, while fiscal generosity is always appreciated, the framework for stewardship that I'm talking about today goes deeper than that; it's about the responsibility we have to live in relation to one another and our world.

I found a lovely definition of Stewardship in Wikipedia: *Stewardship is an ethic that embodies the responsible planning and management of resources. The concepts of stewardship can be applied to the environment and nature, economics, health, property, information, theology, and so forth.*

The "responsible planning and management of resources" – a concept that can be applied to the environment, economics, health, information, theology...

Environmentally speaking, our 7th principle is all about stewardship, recognizing our interdependent web of life, and calling on all of us to protect and responsibly manage our natural resources. That's obviously easier said than done, as we struggle to find balance in our daily lives that mitigates the impact of our very existence. Here at Spirit of Life, our budding permaculture garden is a tribute to our quest for environmental stewardship,

Permaculture is a system of agricultural and social design principles focused on maximizing the features observed in natural ecosystems to create intentional, sustainable, low impact, high yield gardens.

“Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted & thoughtful observation rather than protracted & thoughtless labour; & of looking at plants & animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single-product system.”
Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted & thoughtful observation rather than protracted & thoughtless labour; & of looking at plants & animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single-product system.” said Bill Mollison, considered the father of permaculture.

It is, in essence, life by design, and Mollison intended the concept to be extended to economic systems, land access strategies, and legal systems for businesses and communities. Mollison saw everything as connected and believed the idea of permaculture – of integrated living within our environment – could make life better for everyone.

“We don't understand anything about where we live, and we don't want to. We're happy to power on to the end...”

“Why is it that we don't build human settlements that will feed themselves, and fuel themselves, and catch their own water, when any human settlement could do that easily?”

“I would say, use all the skills you have in relation to others – and that way we can do anything. But if you lend your skills to other systems that you don't really believe in, then you might as well never have lived. You haven't expressed yourself.” (from *Permaculture: Design For Living: An Interview With Bill Mollison*, by Alan AtKisson)

Theologically, stewardship is no less than a Biblical imperative.

In 1 Peter 4:10, we are advised, *“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:”*

“Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God,” said C.S. Lewis. “If you devoted every moment of your whole

life exclusively to His service, you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already.”

Lewis is describing the idea Christian stewardship of the highest level here.

The Episcopal church speaks eloquently to Biblical stewardship: seeing stewardship as more than simply contributing money to the church; it’s also about “contributing time and talents, and volunteering for ministry and mission. It’s about reaching out to build relationships from a perspective of abundance instead of scarcity.

“Creating cultures of gratitude and generosity is a year-round process, this does not happen simply on a day or in a season,” noted the Rev. Laurel Johnston, Program Officer for Stewardship of the Episcopalian Church. “... Gratitude for all that has been given is the primary response of Christian stewards—a response that needs to be cultivated and celebrated year round.”

Similarly, the Catholic church says we are stewards of creation, and as those stewards, we must cultivate

- Joyful appreciation for the God-given beauty and wonder of nature;
- Protection and preservation of the environment, which would be the stewardship of ecological concern;
- Respect for human life—shielding life from threat and assault, doing everything that can be done to enhance this gift and make life flourish; and
- Development of this world through noble human effort—physical labor, the trades and professions, the arts and sciences. We call such effort "work." Work is a fulfilling human vocation.

Stewards of vocation – choosing ways to sustain ourselves that are in alignment with principled living

Being Stewards of their church, goes the thinking, making parishioners “collaborators and cooperators in continuing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which is the Church's essential mission. This mission—proclaiming and teaching, serving and sanctifying—is our task.”

The church literature on the subject goes on to say, “ It is the personal responsibility of each one of us as stewards of the Church. All members of the Church have their own roles to play in carrying out its mission:

- Parents, who nurture their children in the light of faith;
- Parishioners, who work in concrete ways to make their parishes true communities of faith and vibrant sources of service to the larger community;

- All Catholics, who give generous support—time, money, prayers, and personal service according to their circumstances—to parish and diocesan programs
- and to the universal Church.

Perhaps it's this sense of systemic dedicated stewardship to theological codes of conduct that are considered integral to daily life, that has helped mainstream churches maintain, for the most part, their robust congregations, and can also be applied to the world at large.

In Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self Interest (1993), author Peter Block says that stewardship is a successful managing strategy for corporate, governmental, and nonprofit organizations; stewardship, he said in his 1993 book, is fundamentally, the spirit of partnership and service. Stewardship explains how to integrate the management of work and the doing of work to redistribute purpose and power within an organization.

The Acton Institute says economics and stewardship are two sides of the same coin, citing the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), “a movement is intended to bring to bear the moral authority of these leaders on the question of global warming and climate change. Indeed, these Christians see their position tied up with a great responsibility: *“Climate change is the latest evidence of our failure to exercise proper stewardship, and constitutes a critical opportunity for us to do better.”*

“Economics helps us rightly order our stewardship. The fact that some advocates for political action on global warming are now attempting to propose economic arguments for their position is a positive step toward reconciling these two often estranged concepts.”

Beyond environmental and biblical stewardship, is the notion of economic stewardship.

The book, “Stewardship Based Economics” by Raymond W Y Kao, is based on the idea that “Ownership-based economics has led to the rapid development and apparent universal success of the market economy. It is a system built on the deception of resource availability, ill-defined profit, and misled by the idea that an invisible hand can be an equitable system of distribution. It has resulted in a high living standard for a few select individuals, but at the expense of mankind and nature, ultimately culminating in the development of human conflict.

The book is intended to be a “blueprint for the twenty-first century, proposing a two-fold approach to easing the pressure on both the human race and the world we live in. It calls for a change of mindset from **ownership to stewardship** and a shift of responsibility to the corporate entities as a sub-system of the market economy. “

This idea of transforming our largely American cultural mindset of ownership to stewardship is extraordinarily powerful – and the incorporation of the word “responsibility” is key. Here’s a bit from the introductory chapter of the book:

“Ownership-based economics is an endless struggle in search of short term equilibrium between two players (the seller and buyer), without any thought to the true cost of human labor, resources or environmental health. If this is all there is, then the draining of resources, the pollution of the environment, and the depletion of global resources will continue in order to create more personal wealth.”

“Sharing is not about being stupid; it is a means of survival. Innovation and creativity for the better use and development of resources is not just meant to benefit the individual who created and innovated, but must also be for the common good.”

“Although everyone has the right to own, no one can own anything beyond nature’s imposed limitation on the human lifespan. Given a long enough time, no one owns anything, though in a short period of time, everyone owns something. Ownership is at best custodial — stewardship is the only real solution”

In contrast, stewardship-based economics, according to the author, is a knowledge discipline that deals with the livelihood of people on a global basis, taking into consideration both the finite nature of life and of resources. “The contrast with contemporary and traditional ownership based economics is fundamental. Where traditional economics is based on the right of private property ownership, the author’s definition is based on the theory that “individuals are all custodians of property. ***They may make proprietary decisions, but they must assume stewardship responsibility.***”

How about civic stewardship?

We have a Bill of Rights, around which arguments of entitlement often pivot. What if our Bill of Rights was actually called the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities? How would we look at things then?

Amendment I says Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Perhaps the companion responsibility should be to express my religion with respect to the expression of others’ religion, to speak and report responsibly, honestly and compassionately, to assemble peacefully, and to petition intelligently.

Amendment II, which is often reduced to simply “the right to keep and bear arms,” reads in its entirety: A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

A Responsibility clause there might be helpful, as in, I have the responsibility to consider whether I’m part of a militia and actually need a gun, and if I do feel I need a gun, I need to be a responsible gun owner.

Amendment VI says that in criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; and assistance in defense.

The Responsibility here is to be a good and reliable juror to help this process along, and to bear honest witness wherever possible.

Not all the amendments lend themselves so neatly to a responsibility of course - Amendment III prohibits forced quartering of soldiers in our homes by the government, and the best I could come up with there was perhaps a responsibility to know where the nearest hotel was should soldiers come knocking.

But you get the general idea. If we only think in terms of “rights” , we reduce our world to one of entitled ownership – of things and people and ideas – and the result is fragmented protectorates of materialism, indentured servitude and slavery, and intellectual property. I have a friend who likes to say if your only tool is a hammer, all your problems look like nails.

If, on the other hand, we look at ourselves as stewards of our world, how we interact with others in our daily lives should take on new significance.

Our 7 principles are, at heart, principles of stewardship:

1st Principle, recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person, calls on us to treat one another with respect and honor.

2nd Principle of commitment to Justice, equity and compassion in human relations means being champions - stewards - of those ideals in our day to day lives

3rd Principle calling on us to accept one another and encourage spiritual growth in our congregations means to be one another’s shepherds, community stewards caring for one another, no matter our backgrounds and spiritual beliefs

4th Principle recognizing we all deserve opportunities for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, gives us the commensurate opportunity to protect one another during that search

5th Principle of the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large, makes us stewards of our political processes, ensuring that everyone has a voice.

6th Principle, upholding the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all – has stewardship written all over it. We can't have peace, liberty and justice for all, if we don't see all of us as responsible parties to that goal, each with vital roles in making it possible.

And of course, our 7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, is all about stewardship as well, calling upon us to live responsibly and intentionally within our shared habitat.

We get out of life – out of our relationships, our hopes, our dreams, our careers, our creative experiences, and our spiritual ones – what we put into it. We are the Makers of our individual life stories, and collaboratively, we are the Makers of our shared social stories. Together, we must be the stewards of the future we want to have, and that entails living with a sense of responsibility to one another, our environment and our communities.

Let us make it so.

About Terri Willingham

Terri Willingham is the Regional Director for *FIRST* STEM education programs in central Florida (FIRSTFL.org), and a Creative Partner with Eureka! Factory (EurekaFactory.net) , where she works as a consultant with her husband Steve, helping libraries and other organizations develop makerspaces and creative programming. She is the author of two books on health, and the recent book, *Makerspaces in Libraries* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), with more than 30 years of social entrepreneurship experience across a diverse spectrum of fields and interests, all focused on doing work she's passionate about, in a way that she hopes makes the world a better place.