

Taxing, Tithing, and the Privilege of Giving

By Michael A. Schuler

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The Voice of a Modern Wisdom-Speaker From *Stewardship* by Peter Block*

Ultimately, the choice we make is between stewardship and self-interest. Both are attractive. The fire and intensity of self-interest seem to burn all around us. We search, so often in vain, to find leaders and institutions we can have faith in.... But we look at our peers and our neighbors and see so much energy dedicated to claiming entitlements.

We ourselves are no different. We are so career-minded ,, are so invested in our life-style and strive to “make it” in a private and purely materialistic sense.... We were born into the age of anxiety and become adults in the age of self-interest.

The antidote to self-interest is to commit and to find a cause. To enlist in an endeavor beyond ourselves. To be part of creating something we care about enough that we are willing to accept the sacrifice and the risk that commitment entails....

Our task is to co-create organizations we believe in and to do it as an offering, not as a demand. No one will do it for us. Others have brought us this far. The next step is ours. Our choice for service and community is the *only* practical answer to our concerns about the dominance of self-interest.

*Peter Block is a highly regarded organizational consultant.

Reflections

Two summers ago, as the 2004 campaign for the presidency was picking up momentum, a large billboard appeared on Highway 14 between Madison and Cross Plains. This outdoor display featured a bold, eye-catching three-word phrase. “It’s *Your Money*,” it said, while in the lower right-hand corner the distinctive logo of the White House incumbent appeared.

Traveling around Wisconsin that summer, I saw any number of partisan roadside advertisements, but this particular one bothered me the most. It was clearly intended as an anti-tax statement and suggested that whatever income an individual earned, or whatever assets he or she possessed were rightfully and absolutely his or hers to keep. Neither government nor any other public agency has a right to pick your or my pocket.

This is *laissez faire* plain and simple. It implies that the United States is not a community, not a shared social and economic enterprise. It is a loose collection of autonomous individuals and independent earners each seeking to maximize his or her own personal interests. Government impedes that process by literally “stealing” our money to support initiatives from which we receive few, if any, discernable benefits.

While I understand and can even sympathize with this perspective, it is not one that I share—despite the fact that when all is said and done, taxes consume better than 30% of Trina’s and my yearly income.

To be sure, I frequently take exception to the way my tax dollars are allocated—especially by the folks purportedly representing me in Washington. I resent coughing up hard-earned cash for a misguided “war on terror” that I adamantly opposed from the very beginning. I resent being held hostage to a Pentagon that *misplaces* more money than the government spends each year on higher education or affordable housing.

I also don’t like subsidizing wealthy corporations to the tune of \$200 billion dollars annually. Federal corporate welfare exceeds all forms of assistance to the poor, which is one reason why the gap between the top one percent and the bottom forty percent of the population keeps widening.

I also am troubled by the tax system’s growing inequities. Here in Wisconsin, as Assemblyman Spencer Black recently noted, in the last 30 years state corporate taxes have declined from 14% to 6% of all revenue. Increased property and personal income taxes have been used to shore up the state budget. Wisconsin now has some of the highest property taxes in the nation, but its corporate tax rate is among the lowest. Most citizens don’t understand how the tax burden has shifted, so they are easily persuaded that a Constitutional amendment is needed to safeguard their assets.

So as you can see, as tax-time rolls around, I do have a few gripes. And yet I am *not* against taxes per se. In fact, I am probably one of a rapidly disappearing breed of Americans who are *for* taxes and who rue the rising anti-government sentiment that threatens to make our public institutions and public servants increasingly helpless and unresponsive.

The fact is, I don't mind paying high property taxes for public schools as impressive as the ones my son attended for twelve years. Before moving to Madison in 1988, Trina and I considered moving to Albuquerque, New Mexico. One reason we chose *not* to was the admonition we were given to avoid that community's public schools. In Albuquerque, anyone who can possibly afford it, sends their kids to private academies. New Mexico—the “Land of Enchantment”—has some of the lowest taxes in the U.S., but also some of the crummiest schools and most treacherous secondary highways. Give me the dairy state any day.

Wisconsin and Madison have their issues, but the quality of our schools, parks, roads, social services; the professionalism of our police and fire protection; the integrity and intelligence of city and county administrators; the responsiveness of clerks at the Department of Motor Vehicles and in the Department of Revenue; the dedication of those who work for the Department of Natural Resources—over the years I have been duly impressed with the performance of all of them. Quite frankly, employees in the public sector have served me just as well, if not better, than any from private industry. And thus I have never felt, as a citizen of Wisconsin, Dane County, and Madison, that my contributions to the public coffers were either excessive or poorly managed.

I am not a person who agrees that “the best government is one that governs least. Unlike the political philosopher John Locke, I believe the state has a legitimate role to play beyond simply *protecting* the life, liberty and property of its citizens. There was a time when our own federal government contributed meaningfully to the quality of people's lives, and I regret the mean-spiritedness that currently informs our politics.

Lyndon Johnson's much maligned war on poverty demonstrated genuine moral decency, and it got results: between 1959 and 1973 the nation's poverty rate was cut in half—a far better investment, I'd say, than our Iraq misadventure. Similarly, dire poverty among the old is rare today thanks to Social Security and other government-sponsored programs.

As former President Jimmy Carter says in his recent book *Our Endangered Values*, no moral society allows gross inequality to exist, leaves the weak at the mercy of the strong, sacrifices public health and safety for the sake of private profit, allows public assets and non-renewable resources to be plundered, consigns 2/5 of its children to second class

schools, and denies less-affluent young adults a quality post-secondary education. These are all afflictions that could be resolved if those of us with sufficient means were more positive about the uses to which taxes can and ought to be put.

At a deeper and more philosophic level, I ungrudgingly pay taxes because it is all too clear to me that many factors—known and unknown—have contributed to my family's well-being. My own personal ingenuity and effort have been instrumental, but not determinative to my social and economic success. I have been supported, succored, enabled, assisted, and redeemed by outside parties for 55 years. My debt to others is, I believe, inestimable and ultimately incapable of being fully repaid.

So no, I don't agree with that campaign slogan. It is *not* simply “my money.” I will *not* seek to extricate myself from the interconnected, interdependent social and biotic systems of which I am a part and upon which I am and always have been dependent. And I will not seek personal advantage at the expense of those larger systems.

This, in the last analysis, is what galls me about measures like TABOR or the Taxpayer Bill or Rights amendment. Framed in the rhetoric of individual “rights,” these initiatives discount completely the notion that we bear any serious responsibility for one another. Perhaps, as moral beings, we need to re-examine the “potlatch” practice of certain Northwest Indian tribes, which successfully recirculated excess personal wealth, giving it back to the community. The Bible also recommends giving property to the landless and returning property to the dispossessed every so often. Unfortunately, *individual* economic and property rights have become for us so sacrosanct that we can scarcely imagine any alternative.

First Unitarian Society's annual pledge campaign coincides with tax season—a disadvantage in that people are required to think about their commitment to church and state at approximately the same time. But the coincidence is also fortuitous, because some of the same principles apply to both responsibilities.

Now, I willingly submit my taxes not because I expect to receive direct, personal benefit from each payment proffered. Clearly, not everybody

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feels that way. Following the big snow storm a couple of weeks ago, a letter to the editor of one of our local newspapers denounced the city of Madison for failing immediately to plow the streets in his “high tax” neighborhood. As a “big” tax payer, the writer suggested, he was entitled to better service.

Well, that might be the way things work in the free market, but it’s not the principle by which a democratic and putatively egalitarian society operates. In a “community” we pay according to our ability, understanding that this does not necessarily secure us greater privileges. This is, I believe, an absolutely core assumption of an ethically viable social contract.

Similarly, Trina and I pledge 5% of our income to First Unitarian Society each year *not* because of anything concrete, or economically advantageous, the institution provides. Our son is now in college, so we no longer benefit even from the Sunday school program. It is the intangibles that matter, and these really begin to add up when I do some simple accounting. I will mention just a few of them.

I am aware of my own incompleteness and inconsistency as a moral being and realize that I need a community to challenge my assumptions and keep me connected to a greater vision of the common good. As Peter Block alluded, “Our choice for service and community is the only real answer to the reign of self interest.” Or, as one of our members, Lorna Aaronson said in her recent pulpit testimonial,

Whenver a child is dedicated at First Unitarian Society, the congregation pledges to “share with them their insights, values, and dreams,” so that they may become aware of and committed to something *larger* than self.

“this place helps me keep an eye on my values.”

It is important, also, for our children to develop an inner eye for values, to be provided a safe and reasonably tolerant place where they can discuss those values, where they are encouraged to inculcate virtue. Whenever a child is dedicated at First Unitarian Society, the congregation pledges to

“share with them their insights, values, and dreams,” so that they may become aware of and committed to something *larger* than self.

In a world governed by the iron rule of self-interest, a faith community like this one performs an important counter-cultural task. It has made a difference in my son’s life, and, over time, it can

make a difference in the lives of your children and grandchildren as well.

I also believe in my own spiritual potential and am committed to my own spiritual growth. I know of no religious movement on the planet capable of assisting me in that task more than Unitarian Universalism—open-minded, open-ended, full of thoughtful, skeptical people who keep me on my toes.

I am here, too, to experience sacred beauty: architecture by one of the world’s greatest modern artists, poetry and music from both the Eastern and Western canon. Whether or not one resonates to the Sunday message, the music and the ambiance of First Unitarian Society ceaselessly inspire.

And finally, I believe in what this community has to offer to the larger world. Amidst the clamor of petty exclusionary dogmas, ours is a voice of curiosity and inclusion.

At a time when the social and economic rights of so many are being abrogated, we actively promote the worth and dignity of all.

While our nation’s leaders defend violence and even torture in the name of freedom, we seek to call Americans to their best selves.

In a world of rapidly diminishing resources, we emphasize with the practical and moral necessity of walking lightly upon the earth.

Now, if I were to take a random sample of the people in the pews today, I’d bet that most would support a faith community established on the preceding principles. And yet not a few of you probably resist the suggestion that such principles and such a community are worthy of even a small fraction of your annual income. There is, too often, a real disconnect between our principles and our pocketbook.

This is not universally true, of course. Sue and Mark Rosa, who recently gifted the Society with a stunning hand-built harpsichord that Mark built, have added significantly to the plentitude of sacred sound and beauty in this place.

Just as impressive was Jane H. Wood’s recent gift of her Shorewood Hills house, which added almost \$450,000 to the Society’s endowment. I visited Jane the other day and asked what motivated her to make such an extraordinarily generous gesture. “To inspire others to do the same,” she replied. “And I’ll be really disappointed if no one follows my example.”

Others, like Bill and Joyce Wartmann and Orren and Charlotte Helsted have also made exceptional contributions—always without any expectation of

personal gain or economic advantage. In Jane Wood's case, the gift was an expression of profound gratitude for what this community has added to her life for fifty years.

First Unitarian Society is not the Red Cross, the ACLU, the Sierra Club or American Players Theater. We are not a "charity" nor are we just another needy non-profit.

We are a community of mutual support, spiritual enrichment, and moral aspiration. We come together because we believe First Unitarian Society can make our own lives and the lives of our families noticeably better—not materially, but in a far deeper and ultimately more fulfilling sense. We come together, too, because we feel that the values and vision of this institution are good for a world torn by suspicion and ruled by raw self-interest.

Giving to such a community needs to be treated as a *sacrament*, a gift of the most significant kind—a gift with real redemptive possibilities. Such being the case, a tithe would be nice—10% of your family's annual income. But you know what, I'd be willing to settle for five.

I'd like to conclude with a story I heard in California this past week, at a conference Trina and I were attending.

Epiphany Episcopal Church in Washington, DC is a fairly affluent congregation located in a depressed part of the city. For years it has provided homeless people with a free, hot breakfast, but a couple of years ago it was decided to hold an 8 a.m.

worship service for those in the homeless community who wished to attend. Based on the traditional Episcopal liturgy, the service quickly grew in popularity.

One day, however, several regular attendees approached the Rector of the parish and asked why one standard element of the liturgy—the offertory—was missing from the 8 a.m. service. The Rector replied, "We recognize your circumstances and want you to accept this worship service as our gift to you." "But," the homeless people responded, "if this is to be our church, our service, we need to help support it."

Today an offertory is included at Epiphany's 8 a.m. service, and most attendees gladly place a few coins or a dollar in the plate each week. Not much, but probably a larger portion of their meager assets than many of us contribute to this outstanding faith community. For these humble men and women, giving is indeed a privilege. Is it for us as well?

Closing Words

From Linda Underwood
All this talk of "saving souls."
Souls weren't made to save,
Like Sunday cloths that give out at the seams.

They're made for wear; they
Come with lifetime guarantees.
Don't save your soul.
Pour it out like rain on cracked, parched earth.

Give your soul away,
Or pass it like a candle-flame.
Sing it out, or laugh it up the wind....

I will spend my soul.
I will play it out like sticky string
Into the world,
So I can catch every last thing I touch.