



A World Without Scarcity

Clay Nelson © 29 April 2018

Money and I have always had a complicated relationship.

My parents loved to tell the story about when I was four. We were visiting one of their friends during the Christmas holiday. Our host gave me a crisp one dollar bill as a Christmas gift. Apparently, I burst into tears, crying that I wanted “real monies”. He took the dollar back, went into his den, and came back with a roll of fifty pennies, which immediately satisfied my objections. I’m relieved to say I have no memory of the event, which gives me hope that the story is apocryphal.

When I was six my parents decided I should receive an allowance. It was ten cents a week and for that sum I was to make my bed. Every day I failed to do so a penny would be deducted. They told me that on my birthday every year after that I would get a five-cent rise and another chore. Maths was never my strongest suit but it didn’t take me long to figure out that by the time I was 18 my allowance would only be 70 cents, to which I moaned to my mother that I wished it would be a dollar. I must’ve been a prodigy. In a mere two years I had figured out that one dollar was now “real monies”. I do remember this episode and my mother’s response. “It will never be enough. No matter how much you make, your wants and needs will be greater.” What was meant but unsaid was, “Learn to be grateful for what you have or be resentful for what you don’t.”

A year later, when my annual income was \$7.80, I learned that the Red Cross was collecting donations for a family in our small Oregon town that had lost their home in a fire. I took my hoarded fortune to school and encouraged my classmates to add to it. We then took it in a paper bag to our teacher to give to the Red Cross. I was quite surprised when the local weekly paper mentioned me in a very brief article about our efforts for the family. Thinking back on it now after being lambasted here for my billboards at St Matthew’s, it was probably the most favourable press I’ve ever received.

Jumping ahead to year 7. My class was given an assignment to write a research paper on the career we wanted when we were adults. I thought I’d like to be a doctor. Many years later when going through my mother’s keepsakes after her death, I found the paper. I was amused and not a little embarrassed that my motivation for being a doctor was less than noble. It was not the healing arts that drew me, but my impression that doctors made lots of money. The irony was not lost on me, as I had by this time been a minister for 13 years. Not having learned the televangelist’s knack for turning the Gospel into gold, my adequate, but hardly generous stipend was not my motivation. My reward for my labours had nothing to do with money. Still doesn’t. It was the meaning and purpose it gave my life. And besides, it was fun and gave me joy.

The only time I remember finding money or lack of it truly motivating was when I was 16. Finding my 60-cent allowance inadequate for taking a date to the movies I got my first job. It being the early days of McDonald’s there were no burgers to flip for 200 miles. Instead I got

a job in a restaurant as a dishwasher and kitchen hand for 90 cents an hour. It was a dirty, hot job with an irascible boss. I was jealous of my best friend getting a job as a stock boy at the supermarket across the street for a dollar an hour. Suddenly the 10-cents difference sounded like “real monies”.

I was by far the youngest in the kitchen. By the end of the summer, when the job came to an end, I had two strong impressions. One, I felt compassion for those who continued to work there as adults after I left and still could not afford to eat in the restaurant where they fed others. And two, I wanted to get an education so I might live to work, not work to live.

For the next seven years while I got that education, I worked to live. The jobs were often mind-numbing, laborious and necessary to society’s well-being. Cleaning public toilets is no treat... I know. No one would choose to do these jobs unless there was no other choice to feed and house their families. At university, I didn’t have to do them, but I did them anyway. My parents were not people of means but they managed at some sacrifice to pay my fees and housing. I knew I was privileged and very embarrassed to be dependent on their generosity. I worked to pay my incidentals and later I worked to contribute to my university costs. They never asked me to do so. Once, when I needed a cheque to pay my fees, I remember telling my mother I will pay you back as soon as I can. I’ve never forgotten her response, “You pay us back by doing the same for your children.” That’s when I learned that generosity can’t be paid back, only forward... with gratitude.

I suspect that I’m not the only one who has had a complicated relationship with money. This is just my journey. We each have had our own. Money has a huge power over us in our culture. It’s ironic. Money does not represent anything with value like silver or gold or love. It is based on a promise that the government that prints as much or as little as it needs will honour it as having value. Even more ironically, we have cut out the middle man...person? I rarely deal with currency. My pay is electronically deposited into my account. Direct debits pay my water and electricity bills and my pledge. When I buy my groceries my eftpos card is scanned and the money comes out of my account. ATMs are disappearing faster than public phone booths did after the arrival of cell phones because we rarely need cash. But even in a cashless society, money still complicates our lives. It gives us value and tells us what we value. It determines our standard of living, and whether we work to live or live to work. It gives us a sense of false security and an ability to care as best we can for those we love. Most importantly it is the measure of scarcity and scarcity is about control.

Scarcity is real. There is not enough housing in Auckland. Housing is expensive because it is scarce. Why don’t people move to the less populated regions of New Zealand? The simple answer is too few jobs exist there. Housing is cheap there if you have a job that can pay the mortgage. If not, better to stay in Auckland and pay landlords astronomical rents if you have a job that can pay the rate. If not, move to Papakura or Dairy Flat and commute far away from friends and family and your church community.

Oh yes, scarcity is real. When I was born in 1949 the world population was estimated to be 2.5 billion people. Today it is 7.6 billion. Climate change has made a smaller portion of the earth habitable for those who were born with me. Air is more polluted. Potable water is harder to access. Of the total population 100 million children die each year of malnutrition. At any given time 793 million people are suffering from malnutrition. Too many of them are in New Zealand. Malnutrition is a contributing factor to 40,000 of our kids being hospitalised a year. There are 4.87 million of us today and for a first world country that is an

appalling number of children who may not live long enough to have a complicated relationship with money. They will not work out of guilt or go on dates or go to school to have a meaningful work life. They may not even have an opportunity to work to live.

Yes, scarcity is real, but it isn't either. Every year kiwi household throw away an estimated \$2 billion dollars of food and supermarkets throw away another \$873 million of food. Charity food drives have to throw out food donations that are well past their use-by date. It appears that even when we contribute food with all good intentions, we simply clean out our cupboards of food left to languish that we wouldn't feed our children. Now that is a complicated relationship with money.

Today we are in a season that every church must celebrate as much as Christmas and Easter. This is Pledge Sunday. Boy, does our relationship with money get complicated at this time of year. Churches, being voluntary institutions, rely on contributions from their members. Budgets are built on it. Programmes are planned on it. Ideally, it frees us from the fear of scarcity, a scarcity that is real and isn't.

Christian churches build their case for donations on scriptural references. Unitarians are not so lucky. We don't get to rely on guilt. We don't have a God that demands it. It is usually a simple rational argument. Here is what it costs to keep the lights on – are you going to step up to help?

A part of me really likes the transparency of that approach. We are a rational faith after all. Tell me what is needed and I'll do my best to help. But there is another part of me that feels we are missing an opportunity.

Our pledge goal is \$70,000 this year. That's a lot for a small congregation. If we get there we will all be delirious with happiness. The finance committee will be breaking out the good whisky, but that goal is just about staying the same. Reaching that goal says that Auckland has just enough progressive religion calling for transformation of society to be more kind and just and fair. That does not ask us to look at our complicated relationship with money. Do we possess money or does money possess us? Do we give out of fear that there is not enough or out of generosity that there will always be enough, thankful for those who did the same so we have a place to worship and carry on our mission? Do we give for what we get out of our belonging here or are we giving for those who follow us? Or are we going to give with the same rationality that thinks cleaning out the back of our pantry is enough to feed hungry children?

There is one part of giving to our mission that is the same as getting a roll of fifty pennies for a dollar. Thanks to New Zealand tax law, you get 30% of your charitable giving back as a tax rebate. So, one dollar given is really only 66 pennies. Now that is "real monies".