

“New Beginnings—New Hope”

November 5, 2017

Keweenaw Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Houghton, Michigan

“New Beginnings—New Hope”

Rev. Chris Rothbauer

I remember vividly Christmas of 1988. Despite it being twenty-nine years ago, it was the first year that my father was gone, separated and eventually divorced from my mother. I was still in a sort of shock, not believing it was happening and still not fully aware of the drastic consequences it would soon have on my life. We were never rich, but, up to that point, we at least had enough money for some nice clothes, good food, and, yes, a basement full of Christmas presents, all the latest toys a young kid in the eighties could want. Life to that point seemed pretty good.

But, nearly overnight, we found ourselves go from lower middle class to the working poor, forced to radically change our lifestyle to accommodate a severe reduction in income.

See, my father’s departure meant that my mother and I were living off her paycheck from her job at Hardee’s, a minimum wage job, and, with no contributions from my father that year, Christmas didn’t look like it would be so merry. My mother was preparing me for the idea that I might not get as many presents this year and that I really needed to pick one big thing that I wanted.

I can’t remember what I choose that year, but I do remember I got it. More impressive, though, was how full my stockings were, just how much there was for me to open. At first, I couldn’t figure out what had happened. Maybe it really was a Christmas miracle? I was only

expecting one thing and here were a bunch more than that, all stacked up, ready for a child's glee on Christmas morning.

I soon noticed something strange, though. Inside one of the stockings was a stuffed animal, a little dog with its head sticking out, staring at me with that adorable look such toys always give which seem to scream, "Squeeze me!" Except this wasn't the first time I'd seen this particular stuffed animal. I didn't play with it much, but I knew it was part of my existing collection, one that must have been plucked out of my toy bin because my mom hoped I wouldn't notice.

I never told my mother I realized what she had done. I knew she had good intentions and was willing to put on a bit of a farce in order to make me still feel as if I'd had a good Christmas. She didn't want me to feel as if there was nothing for me that Christmas, so she did what she could to make sure the stockings were full. In fact, her coworkers had chipped in to help her buy some presents for me, an act that I hope to be able to pay forward someday.

And I did feel loved, that Christmas and every one after. We didn't always have a lot of money Like Maddi in our story this morning, we didn't always even have enough food. There were times my mother skipped a meal to ensure I had enough to eat, and I remember eating plenty of government issued cheese, pork, peanut butter, and powdered milk. No matter how hard things got, my mother always wanted me to feel provided for, like I lacked nothing, and so it was surprising when, as an adult, I found out just how many times we were only a paycheck away from financial disaster, the possibility of homelessness or more skipped meals on the horizon.

My mother never let me feel poor because she wanted me to believe that I could one day do better than she had, and it worked. Other children aren't so fortunate.

Economic justice is a very personal issue for me because I believe every person, regardless of circumstance, deserves a warm place to sleep, enough food to sustain themselves, and the goods necessary to live a life of flourishing. It is one of the great injustices of our time and place that so many people, even within our own local area, have to go to sleep cold, hungry, and alone every night. In our land of plenty, where some people have so much money they'll never be able to spend it all in their lifetime, people go without.

I refuse to accept this situation. Along with Martin Luther King, Jr., I can't help but "refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."¹ In our nation of plenty, where we profess that every person has the same opportunity as every other, how are there children who will wake up without presents on Christmas, or who will not know the pleasure of a hot Thanksgiving meal.

It baffles me just as much as I hope it does you.

Charity will never completely alleviate this lack. That can only come with drastic changes to the way our society functions, changes which probably won't come overnight or anytime soon. And, in order to be just, charity must always be accompanied by the tools to allow a person to become self-sustaining, to allow them the dignity of a life they can be proud of, where they have some say in their destiny and real choices for how to move forward in life.

But, in the short term, charity can provide hope as we grapple with larger societal solutions. Just as I felt loved as I awoke that Christmas morning to a stocking full of presents and just as Maddie realized the love of Sofia's family who helped her in her time of crisis, so the generosity of community can be a force to remind us that we are all interconnected, especially in times of trouble.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," 28 August 1963, Federal Archives, Retrieved 4 November 2017 from <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

Let us not forget to strive for the larger societal changes which will make charity unnecessary. In the meantime, though, may the work of these organizations and people bring many smiles and much hope throughout the holidays.

“Options and Choices”

Horst Schmidt

When you're working in social services, called welfare when I started, for several decades. You see a part of life you may not realize existed—mental and physical limitations nature gave us or happened. Or were self-inflicted.

What one does not see very often is success. At least success as defined in America. Because without success one is not usually accorded respect. Negative labels are ascribed: white and trash are combined, the N word and many more. No access to the good life. No good choices.

We have food pantries, food stamps, homeless shelters, substance abuse treatment, handicap access, Medicaid, work programs. They do meet a need. But they give you a negative label, if not in your mind, then by others.

We also have an expectation they will be grateful. To show the giver they appreciate the generosity so the giver feels better. They say, “Thank god, I'm not one of them.”

When an idea comes along where people have not had positive choices, a project like Angel Mission is a breath of fresh air. A store without a cash register. A place that says you are respected. You have choices. How liberating does that feel?

Terry Bazin, co-director at the Angel Mission, becomes enthused when she talks about the things they do. Putting out new clothes on the racks. Getting ready for the school year so

kids have the necessary supplies to start out the year. Weren't you excited to have all your stuff as you headed off on that first day of school? More serious problems such as a car breakdown where the budget can't stretch. Angel Mission will give people money for repairs. This way they can keep their jobs, put food on the table and pay the rent and utilities and have a little peace of mind.

We took a second collection at the service this past Sunday. We received contributions totaling \$455. I want thank everyone who took the opportunity to give.

If you wish to contribute food, clothing or used household goods, go to the store at 119 5th St. during business hours. 10 AM to 3 PM on Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. 10 AM to 6 PM Fridays. If you wish to send a check, make it out to New Beginnings Angel Mission and send to the store at 119 5th St., Calumet 49913.

Take a look at their Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pg/New-Beginnings-Angel-Mission-183528171729073/about/?ref=page_internal.