Before I begin, I would like to thank those that have shared their testimonials at the last four services. Lisa Bohne, Jeff Phillips, Dan Yokas and Linda Berry. They were all remarkable talks and deepened my appreciation for the very special community we have here.

Hilary, your sermon helped all of us understand where joy and generosity meet so I will just humbly add my own perspective in this message of aspiration.

So we have heard that there is joy in giving to something of meaning greater than you. That is clear. This has been said by sages and prophets throughout the ages including Jesus who said it was better to give than to receive. It has been confirmed by psychologists who have studied the impact of money on happiness, that measurable happiness levels are increased more when people give money away versus spending on themselves.

So what is it that we are contributing to that provides us with so much meaning?
First, we contribute our community. Our modern, secular world is very bad at creating communities. In our society most of our relationships tend to pursue connection for purely individualistic ends such as financial gain, social advancement or romantic love. Virtualization has made this even more impersonal and anonymous. There is a documentary that just came out about a woman named Joyce Carol Vincent who lived in London and was found dead in her apartment after three years. In three years, no neighbor even bothered to wonder why she hadn’t been seen. Modern society has created a “bowling alone” culture and yet, it is widely shown that community and social relationships are the most important factors in a person’s well being.

Compare that story to an experience of a friend I know that had the opportunity to visit an agricultural community in the country of Belize. According to him, he had never seen a group so financially poor and at the same time so noticeably happy. As Emerson said in his definition of success, “they laughed often and much”. Similarly in our way, our countryside community allows us to express our full humanity, to share joy with each other and very importantly support us in times of stress, distress and trauma.

Second, we contribute to our values. We come together because we value the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. Is there any
doubt that these values are under siege in our society? If you need an example, how about the disrespectful attacks by Rush Limbaugh on the open expression of reproductive government policy by Sandra Fluke. How many ways does this contradict our values? The inherent worth and dignity of every person? The acceptance of one, another? The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process? And by the way, if we are looking to government leaders to enforce these values, think again. Most candidates running for the highest office in our land were silent or tepid in their response to this attack.

There are powerful forces that are intent on imposing their own value on us. And by the way, there are religions out there, like the Mormon Church that makes a 10% tithe a requirement of membership. And I should know, I was raised in the Mormon faith for the first 12 years of my life. Do we want their financial commitment to determine the values we honor in our world? I feel a sense of urgency into committing to a movement which upholds our own values that I hold dear.

In seeking to be happier we need to navigate the two unavoidable pains in life: The pain of discipline or the pain of regret. We get to choose. I chose the discipline of regular contributions to this
community as compared to the regret of leaving a world to my children and grandchildren that I would not like to live in.

Finally we contribute to our spirituality. We are spiritual beings in a human form. Spirituality provides a search for personal meaning which is larger than the individual self and people that are spiritual are relatively happier, have superior mental health, cope better with stressors, have more satisfying marriages, use drugs and alcohol less and are physically healthier and live longer lives.

But many of us cannot find spirituality in conventional religions which specify a certain set of beliefs of the unknowable. Here, we encourage your personal journey towards spiritual growth. Where do you find the sacred through Countryside? Is it in our worship services, music programs, retreats, nature walks, book groups, covenant groups? How valuable is that to you?

So when it comes to giving, it is your personal decision. As for Peyton and me we decided to do something different this year. In the past we looked at how much we had given and unless we had a change in our financial circumstance, would make a modest percentage increase to the year before. Although we were good contributors, I will admit we were not giving our fair share according to the UUA guidelines.
This year we will give our fair share and because of that commitment and a fortunate change to my working situation we will more than double our pledge from this year.

Now, you might say, well of course, he’s the Stewardship Chair, he had to do that. Well the fact is that I had already evolved towards this mental commitment before I chose to take this role. I frankly would not have taken this on if it were about filling holes in our operating budget. I came to realize, perhaps encouraged by my happiness studying and teaching, that stewardship is a spiritual practice not management exercise of which I was more familiar. It is an act which done with the right mindset can provide joy and fulfillment.

Today, I will tell you, I have never felt more joyful about my gift to Countryside.