



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Bringing Gifts, Receiving Blessings,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on April 14, 2013

I want to share with you a couple of paragraphs from this little book called *Life Work*, by Donald Hall, the poet and essayist who lives and writes in New Hampshire and was married to the poet Jane Kenyon until her death a few years ago:

“We moved to New Hampshire in 1975, to undertake the life of free-lance writing, and to live in the farmhouse my great-grandparents bought in 1865. My grandmother was born here in 1878 and my mother in 1903. Our first Sunday in New Hampshire I thought: ‘*They* will expect us to go to church.’ I suppose *they* were my cousins; church was the small white clapboard South Danbury Christian Church two miles north, which my great-grandparents Ben and Lucy Keneston helped to build in 1868, and where my grandmother played the organ seventy-eight years, from the age of fourteen until she was ninety-two, and where I sat on Sundays as a child when I visited my grandparents. For decades I had not gone to church, nor had Jane, and we went that first Sunday grudgingly, without enthusiasm, to hear the young man in the pulpit quote ‘the German poet Rilke’ --which pricked up our poetical ears.

“But there was something else, something that endures--a community radiating the willingness or even the desire to be careful and loving. This community was my cousin Edna, her sister Martha, our cousin Audrey, Annie Walker who played the organ following my grandmother, and other neighbors who assumed us into their rows as if we had just returned from a journey. The tender welcome was irresistible, and we went again the next Sunday and the next. One Sunday Jane was ill and stayed in bed; I would stay home with her--but five minutes before Church I knew I had to go, and sped off in the Plymouth, astonished at my desire.”<sup>1</sup>

Two days ago I had a thought about this weekend, and went to my computer to see if I was right, and I was: five years ago yesterday, on March 13, 2008; five years ago today, if you’re counting by Sundays, you in this congregation voted to call me as your minister. Back then I had a hunch that this was going to be good. But I didn’t know for sure, and neither did you.

The Saturday of that weekend, the Ladies Circle put on a tea here, one more time to come and and kick the tires of the would-be minister. My wife and children came too, and Pat Feller gave them a tour of the building. When the tea was over, the last event of that week of getting to know you, I was pretty pumped. But I wanted to know how my family felt. On the way to the car I

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Hall, *Life Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

asked, “Well? What do you think?” Any my wife Tracey said, “This church just has a good feel to it.”

She saw here what Donald Hall found in that little church in New Hampshire: “...something that endures--a community radiating the willingness or even the desire to be careful and loving.”

This is what I’ve had the privilege to be part of and bear witness to over these five years: the many ways you reach out to one another and to those outside our walls, acts of kindness and caring, of forgiveness, reconciliation and generosity that make a difference.

That’s why I love the church and believe in it, as a place with the potential to change individual lives, and, in the fullness of time, transform the world. Do you see that here? That the community we are trying to build is like that that home John O’Donohue wrote his blessing for: “a safe place, a place of discovery, a house of welcome and courage,” where “we have eyes to see that no one arrives without a gift and no one leaves without a blessing.”<sup>2</sup>

Today I just want to hold up a mirror to you and say, “Do you see this here? Do you see it in yourself--that your presence here is a gift? That being who you are, you are a blessing to others, and to this world.”

Sometimes I get to hear your stories, and see this exchange of gifts and blessings taking place. But I only get to see some of what happens here, as do you--there are small but meaningful encounters happening all the time, some of them between two or three people, others quietly, hiddenly, within our own hearts and minds. But blessings and gifts, none the less.

I have a particular role to play here, and I’m glad and grateful for that, more than you know. But you, the gathered congregation, you are the church. You know that, don’t you? If we are doing good things here, if this is a place of warmth and welcome, of beauty and possibility, it’s because of you.

This understanding--that our strength and wisdom is found not in a few, but in all of us, in the the gathered community--is central to Universalism and our congregational tradition. We believe that this diverse group of individuals, gathered together, can do good and powerful things. That you don’t need to leave your individuality at the door--no, the invitation is to come here bringing your whole self, because what this church needs and what our world needs is people who are living fully into who they were born to be. The testimonials we’ve been hearing lately are reminders of this--that a thriving community doesn’t subsume or diminish the individual, it lifts us and celebrates the gifts and talents we each bring.

It’s kind of like a choir, where not everyone has the same part. Sometimes you sing a solo, sometimes you sing in unison, other times in harmony. At the first rehearsal, you might say, “I can’t do this. It’s too hard, and I don’t understand how it will ever work.” But with practice and effort, you learn your part, you join you voice with others, and when it all comes together, you create something amazing.

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<sup>2</sup> John O’Donohue, “Blessing for a New Home,” from *To Bless the Space Between Us*.

Every Sunday we collect an offering, which is both practical and symbolic. It symbolizes the fact that you, the gathered community, are the ones who make this place possible. And it's practical, because the money you give is what keeps this church going, and helps us to be healthy and thriving. Some of you don't put money in the plate every week, because you mail your check to the office, or you've set up an automatic bank draft that regularly sends us money. Isn't technology great? But there is value, I believe, in participating in that ritual of giving.

If you're new here, you may not know that, once a year, we ask you to think about your financial support for the church, and then tell us what you plan to give over the next year. Most people figure this out based on how often they get paid. They say "I'll pledge a certain amount per week, or per month." We makes plans and choices and a budget based on what you tell us.

This year, we're on the cusp of some good and exciting things. We've been invited to be part of a one year program called "Leap of Faith," twelve UU congregations in New England identified as "healthy and vital," being paired up to lean and collaborate together. We're planning on having a student intern here for the next two years. Last year, with the help of a \$4000 grant, we expanded the Director of Religious Education position; this year, we need to pay the whole amount ourselves.

I see this as a pivotal moment. There are good things happening here, and we are poised to live more boldly into our mission of transforming individual lives and the world. I imagine us a congregation that feels safe enough to take risks, that has a sense of purpose and adventure; a church where people expect to find something great every Sunday, and during the week too; that exudes a sense of "you want what we have to offer here," a community that is juicy and energetic; known in this city as a church with a commitment to what is good and just, and also as a big-hearted and warm-hearted church that knows how to have fun.

This isn't just my vision. It's what I see happening here already, what you are making possible. Do you see it too?

That exciting and promising time, when we ask you to make a financial commitment for the coming year, the time you have been waiting for, is upon us. In the next couple of weeks we're hosting house gatherings--a time to get together with other church folks; to make connections and meet new people and have fun, and to think about this congregation and what it means to you. And then, to make that commitment. If you went to one of these gatherings last year, you know they were fun. There wasn't any arm-twisting--would we do that? It's a time to make connections and then to make your commitment. We print up these pledge cards and you think about what you can give and fill out the card. Your pledge is confidential and we are grateful for what you can contribute.

You may wonder, how much should I give? The answer is up to you. What does this church mean to you, and how much can you afford? People give based on their own financial situations. For the current year, the average gift is somewhere between \$22 and \$25 per week. And that's average--some give more and some give less, as they are able.

I know you don't come to here on Sunday to hear about church finances. But this is your church, and so you need to know the basics of how it works. If you're new here, and still figuring out if this is going to be your church home, take your time--we don't expect you to pledge yet. But if this is your church, then we need you to make this commitment. If we're going to be strong and vital, we need you. If you want to have a more in-depth conversation about pledging or church finances, please speak with me, or Megan Shea, any of the other members of our stewardship team. I hope you'll want to come to one of our house gatherings. You'll have a good time, and meet nice people. So please, sign up for one today!

I hope that John O'Donohue's words will remain with us; that we in this community will have eyes to see that no one arrives without a gift, and no one leaves without a blessing. My charge to you is to remember that your presence here is a gift and a blessing. You don't always get to know the impact your actions have so I charge you to have faith--that your presence does make a difference.

At St. Paul's Cathedral in London, there's a plaque dedicated to the architect of that magnificent and beautiful building, Sir Christopher Wren. It reads in Latin, *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*—If you seek a memorial, look around you.

If you ever wonder about your life, if it matters, if you are making any kind of difference at all, look around you. See the impact you have on your family and friends. See the person you listened to, carefully, at coffee hour. See the children you taught in Sunday school, the elder you visited in the hospital; remember the meal you prepared for those who were hungry, or that project you worked on. And remember the kindness someone extended to you.

Here is what I know. This house we are building together here, it is good and powerful and life-affirming and life changing. Look around you. Here we are--bringing gifts and receiving blessings. It's beautiful! And we are just getting started.

Amen.