



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Pay it Forward: A Spirituality of Generosity,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on April 15, 2012

Do any of you listen to public radio? If so, you know that several times a year, they have these on-air fund drives. Lately the stations I listen to have been making an effort to intensify these efforts and raise the money they need in a shorter amount of time, so they can get back to their regular programming. And it seems to be working. Nobody enjoys the on-air fund drive.

In at least one way the church is like public radio. What we offer here is accessible, whether you pay for it or not. If you keep coming, we will ask you to contribute, and we hope you will respond. But we can't make you. Some days it seems like a funny and uncertain way to run an institution. But it's what we've got!

Some of you are like those listeners to public radio. You want us to move through our stewardship campaign as quickly as possible, so we can get back to our regularly scheduled programming. You have told me so.

But others of you take a different view. You are thinking we need to make stewardship more of a year 'round conversation--not a once a year blitz that we try to get through as quick as we can. You're not saying you want us talking about money every Sunday, but you understand that there is not a split between money and spirituality. I am grateful to the good people on our stewardship team this year, and how they are inviting you into conversations about giving. And of course I'm grateful to all of you who give; you who understand that generosity is part of a healthy spiritual life.

Let me be clear--we are not public radio. Religion comes from the latin word “religio,” which means to bind back together, to reunite. It's the same root as ligament, which helps hold our bodies together. Our job is to hold together what others want to separate--to heal the split between the spiritual and the material, to balance heaven and earth. Every Sunday, we invite you to reflect on the stuff of your lives, to try to gather up the pieces and see that they are part of a beautiful and coherent whole. In a world that wants to push away what is difficult or uncomfortable, we invite you to open yourself to sorrow as well as joy, to the shadow as well as the light. We try to help you lead an undivided life.

About a month ago I had dinner with Joan Shaw and Taffy Jervey. If you don't know them, they are long-time members of this church. They've been together as a couple for 29 years! Almost two years ago, on a steamy July day, they were married here. It was a wonderful day. Taffy and

Joanie bought my offering of a sermon of their choice at our church auction, and they were clear what they wanted me to preach about. “Pay it forward,” they said.

I don’t think they picked this topic for institutional reasons, though they are deeply committed to this church. They want you to hear this message of pay it forward because it has shaped and transformed their lives. It’s a core principle they live by, and that has made all the difference. They know what the doctor and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer knew, that “the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

We live in a consumer culture--so many things come with a price tag attached. We are accustomed to asking, “What’s it cost?” If you want something, you have to pay for it. We have expressions about this, like “You get what you pay for,” and “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

That’s one way to see the world--as a series of contracts and exchanges, that always favors those who have more resources. Is that the world you want to live in? And is that an accurate representation of how things are?

I’ve shared with you before the prose poem by Naomi Shihab Nye about her experience in an airport departure lounge in our post-9/11 world. She describes a scene in which fear is overcome by sharing, and human goodness shines through. There’s a line that always gets me. She writes, “I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, ‘This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.’” <sup>1</sup>

Our Universalist faith says we are part of a great Love, a Love that will not let us go, so we are compelled to live open and generous lives. In our unison affirmation we say, “Love is the doctrine of this church.” This means we try to choose hope over resignation and faith over fear. We don’t say, “The doctrine of this church is ‘look out for number one.’” No, we say love.

The idea of “Pay it Forward” comes from a novel <sup>2</sup> that became a movie. The idea is that you do something for someone else, and you ask them to pass it on. Not to pay you back, but to pay it forward to another person. Pay it Forward has become a movement, which has spread around the world. A week from Thursday, April 26, is International Pay it Forward Day, a day when millions of people will intentionally commit acts of kindness and caring.

Pay it forward is based on something called the ripple effect--the idea that, like a pebble dropped in a pond, our actions create ripples that go out and affect others beyond what we can imagine. Bobby Kennedy, speaking in South Africa in 1968, put it this way: “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, these ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, “Gate 4-A.”

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Ryan Hyde, *Pay It Forward*.

Pay it forward is built on the premise that we will make the world better if we share, if we care as much for others as we do for ourselves. It is an effort to change the world, one small act at a time. Yes, there is a ripple effect, and our actions do have consequences. We affect the world, for good and for ill, every day by how we act and by the attitude we bring to the day. The author of our reading today, the pastor Charles Swindoll, says he's convinced that our attitude is more important than facts or circumstances, and "it will make or break a company, a church, a home." He says it's the one thing we can control; that we have a choice every day what our attitude will be.

Taffy and Joanie have chosen to make their attitude, their philosophy a simple one: pay it forward. If you know them, you know they are often smiling, they are fun to be around, they are kind and generous. This is not an accident. It is a choice. It's a reflection of their attitude, their generous spirituality.

The goal of the pay it forward movement is to change the world, one act at a time. This is what religion, at its best, is all about; affirming that, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, faith and hope and love do abide. It's the essence of the Easter message.

The beauty of paying it forward is not just the gift you give to another, the ripples of hope you set in motion. No, the blessing of giving is that you yourself are changed. When you act with a loving heart to make a difference in the world, you are yourself made different. When you reach out to help someone, you too are blessed and transformed. Are you with me on this? Do you know this to be true?

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached it this way: "Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

You get that graceful heart and that loving soul by exercising them, by giving love away, by paying it forward. I get to see you doing this all the time. I see you helping someone who is new here, showing them how we do coffee hour or community meals. I see you visiting people in the hospital or nursing home, writing cards or offering a shoulder to lean on.

Steven Charleston is a Native American and an Episcopal bishop. He was the dean where I went to seminary, and we're now friends on Facebook. He is one of the most grounded and spiritually deep people I know, and one of the people that makes Facebook not a total waste of time. Listen to what he posted the other day:

"Jesus doing the dishes, Moses mowing the lawn. Buddha running the vacuum, Mary cleaning the bathtub. When I was young I thought if I attained a spiritual life I would think great thoughts, say nice things, do good. While some of that may be true, I have learned it is truth that still needs to make its own bed. So here is to all of you who like me have your head in heaven and your hand on a mop. The holy life is not always a mountain top experience, but an experience of a

mountain of pots and pans. God bless the gurus who take out the garbage. You know who you are.”

It says in the Bible “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I hear this not as a commandment or guilt-inducing platitude. It is simply a statement of fact; that in giving, you paradoxically get back more than you give away. The giver, hoping to make a difference, is made different.

How might you pay it forward? That’s for you to decide. Don’t think it has to be big or flashy. Remember these words from Mother Teresa: “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.”

The invitation is to look for ways to give, to serve, to bless. You don’t have to look far--they are all around. And that’s why we’re here. To participate in this exchange of love, giving and receiving, blessing and being blessed.

So open up your hearts. Reach out your hands. Love will guide us. You can change yourself, you can change the world, with your love.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Words by Sally Rogers, from “Love Will Guide Us,” #131 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.