



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“A Tale of Two Churches,”  
a testimonial given by Bill Taylor  
and a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on June 1, 2014

*This testimonial by Bill Taylor preceded the sermon:*

I was raised here in town, in a small house with a big yard that adjoins the Kimball Farm-land, near Rocks Village. I have a lot of fond memories of both my childhood and adolescence in those idyllic surrounds. But I certainly faced my share of challenges growing up, too. I was a sensitive kid, and I was exposed to a lot--both at home and elsewhere.

After four good years away at college and a disastrous year at law school, I came back to the Haverhill-area. And whereas my childhood was often tough and challenging, my mid-twenties were altogether dark. I had a terrible job and often lived hand-to-mouth in a closet-sized apartment. I was severely depressed, without purpose or direction, and I partied a lot. I was in a very bad place. (I'm sure some of you have been there.)

But there were sublime rays of light that occasionally cut through that darkness--good people I met during this time who will remain life-long friends. One such person is my lovely wife, Shana. During these last six years or so, I've built a wonderful life with her while slowly cobbling together the pieces to make my own adult life. I managed to get a decent job, finally bought a car with a Blue Book value that exceeds five hundred dollars--all of those adult-things. And in 2012, we bought a home not too far from here.

But with so much self-focus also came feelings of emptiness and estrangement from my deeply held communitarian values. And bad habits lingered--even until recently. By way of example, I'll mention that my name is on a plaque at The Grill Next Door, the cozy restaurant and brew pub here in town. You make it on the plaque by trying every single one of their 36 beers on tap three times--taking three laps around “the block,” as they deem it. What the plaque won't tell you about my case is how, upon completion of this feat, I took a few victory laps thereafter.

But my commitments are different these days. And my life is more full. And I largely have this place--and you all--to thank for that.

My path to this community, like all good spiritual journeys these days, began with an internet search. I eventually came across the UUCH website, and realized, Oh, that's the beautiful church right down the street, hiding in plain sight! And in the relatively short time I've been here since, it's been one really wonderful experience after another.

Those of us who have happily gathered here for a while now have been blessed to hear Reverend Frank (and Julie, these past few months) share thousands upon thousands of wise words. The most impactful for me personally, believe it or not, were just four: Life beckons us onward. Reverend Frank uttered these words last Fall, in a sermon where he both shared the story of his call to ministry and also talked about the church's prospective involvement in Leap of Faith. But somehow, those words connected with me in such a profound way, they felt like they were intended for me. It's as if they took aim straight for my inner-core, struck it squarely, and bored right through. I needed to follow through with some changes I was making in my life, and those words and that sermon helped me do that.

If you're looking to connect with The Spirit, I think you're in the right church. You can almost hear It crying out from the pores of this old place--the walls, the pews, the floors. And you can sense It weaving through the simple interactions of the friendly people here. You can see traces of It in the gentle smiles on their beautiful faces.

I really love this church. I'm proud to call it my spiritual home. And I'm proud, too, to be part of a community that does so much great work. But we all can do more. And the truth is, how much good work this community does--and how much this church thrives--is entirely up to us. And that's why the Stewardship Campaign is so important. That's why it's so important to give.

*Sermon:*

I'm mostly a hopeful person, open to the possibilities, the amazing grace that comes when our hearts are in that place we just sang about.<sup>1</sup> I trust in the human spirit; the courage and goodness we are capable of. I'm even hopeful about institutions, which aren't much in favor these days. If I didn't believe in the church, in its potential to heal and transform lives, and in the fullness of time, to transform the world, then I couldn't do this work you have called me to.

I believe in you. Over these first six years we have been together, my faith has been strengthened and renewed by your work and witness, by the ways you embody the Spirit moving in this place.

But I have to tell you, sometimes I get discouraged. Sometimes I wonder, is it worth it? Are we making enough of a difference in the world? Or are we just turning the crank, running in place? How are we doing at living our mission of transforming lives and the world?

Recently I told our Board of Trustees that I see two different congregations here. Not two sets of people; but two different views of this church. One is what you see here on Sunday morning: a healthy, thriving congregation, elders and middle-aged folks and young families and babies, people in touch with the Spirit and connecting with one another, helping others and serving the wider world.

Don't you sense a palpable energy in this place? A warmth and a potential? It's what Bill described so beautifully a few minutes ago, talking about this community:

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<sup>1</sup> "When Our Heart is in a Holy Place," by Joyce Poley, #1008 in *Singing the Journey*.

"If you're looking to connect with The Spirit," he said, "I think you're in the right church. You can almost hear It crying out from the pores of this old place--the walls, the pews, the floors. And you can sense It weaving through the simple interactions of the friendly people here. You can see traces of It in the gentle smiles on their beautiful faces."

There is this Spirit moving among us. Have you felt it? Sometimes this happens when everyone is silent and still. Sometimes it happens when we're singing. Sometimes it's in the connections at coffee hour. It's definitely present when we gather to remember and celebrate the life of one who has died.

If you come only on Sunday, you see just part of this. Because it is in the many different quiet and hidden ways that this Love really gets shared. Like when folks visit someone in the hospital, or bring a meal or offer a ride to someone in need. It happens when parents got together to talk about their joys and struggles while their children play. It happens when you feed hungry people downstairs, and when you build houses or garden or meditate together. This network of Love here, in this relatively small congregation, is so intricate that no one gets to see the whole picture. Much of the ministry here, your work and mine, largely goes unseen.

Like I said, I see two congregations here. One is a healthy, vibrant, hopeful, growing church, seen and unseen. But if you look below the surface there's another story. When you look at our numbers--the number of people who make a financial commitment each year, the number of people who visit us but don't stay, the columns of numbers that show what it costs to keep this church going every year--that even with the successes of the past few years, we are still living on the edge.

This morning I hold up a mirror to you, and show you not one, but two congregations. A healthy, thriving one, yes. That's why we were chosen to be part of Leap of Faith, because district leaders see such potential in us. We are one of the few progressive faith communities in Haverhill. We are the one with the rainbow banner, we are the one hosting the Drop-in Center and the Open Hand Food Pantry. We are the church gardening side by side with our Roman Catholic friends from St. James and St. John the Baptist.

But we are small and we have a hard time making ends meet. Most people in Haverhill have no idea we are even here. We pride ourselves on being a warm and welcoming congregation, but new people walk through our doors, we give them one of those blue mugs, and then I see them standing alone at coffee hour. Too few of our leaders are doing too much of the work. There can be a tendency here to be passive, to stand back and let others take responsibility for things. Is that why it's hard, sometimes, to get people to say yes to being leaders, because you fear there won't be others to help?

I understand this. Most of you don't come here to get involved in governance or even sit on a committee. You are here to renew your spirit and be of use in the world. We need to get better at helping you do this. We're working on building a different kind of church, where we spend less time turning the crank of church business so you are freed up to be part of the ministry that you

dream of. And we need you, to tell us about your hopes and dreams for this community, so that together we can build that new kind of church.

Religion is not meant to be a spectator sport. The invitation is to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. To be touched by the Spirit, to know, deep down, that you are loved, so you can then share that love with others. The great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, speaking to a group of young people, said: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

There are more and more ways around here to serve. And you are responding. But there is one way, that most of you would be happy to never hear about. There's a subject that some of you would say, "You shouldn't speak about that in church." It isn't sex. And it isn't politics. It's money.

The truth is, we don't have enough of it. This congregation has struggled for years to pay what is costs to run the church. In recent years we've had help from some cell tower money that helped keep the building going, and from some short-term savings we had in the bank, but that money is gone now. Our endowment funds help, but we are already taking as much from them as we can. Withdrawing any more would be irresponsible.

The plain truth is that we are a community where not everyone is doing their part. Among those who are already making a financial commitment, we're doing pretty well. But we need everyone who is part of this community, whether you've joined the church or not, to help.

After a meeting the other night, I went to visit a young family who is part of our congregation. They have had more than their share of struggles lately. We sat and drank tea and talked. And it was good. I left there that night reminded of why I said yes to this sometimes frustrating calling: because I wanted to be with people like you, and hopefully be of use, in the critical and in the ordinary moments of your lives.

This is what I'm supposed to be doing in ministry: spending time in your homes, and with our youth, and out in the community. Not running a small business. And you too, you are here, aren't you, to explore your spirituality, and serve others, to do what feeds your soul.

When we have to spend too much time and energy asking for money, chasing people to get a commitment; too much time on fundraisers, too much angst squeezing the budget to make it balance, then how much is left for the work we are about: ministering to one another; changing lives and transforming the world?

The good news is that our pledge income has been increasing every year. But not enough. We are \$21,000 short of where we need to be. So at our annual meeting today, the Board will be presenting to you an unbalanced budget. Because this is your church, and you need to decide what you want to do about this.

The situation we're in right now, it's like when you go out to dinner with a group of friends. No separate checks! When the meal is over and the bill comes, you pass it around the table, and

people open their wallets and pay their share. But when someone adds up the cash, guess what--you've come up short. Now what do you do?

That's where we're at. We have the bill in hand for what it costs to run this church. Many of you have already done your part, but we're still \$21,000 short. What are you going to do: dine and dash?

The check is on the table, and some of you have yet to do your part. Maybe you think the little bit you could give doesn't matter. It does. Some of you are new here, and maybe we haven't asked you directly yet. I'm asking now. We need your help. We only ask you to give as you are able. If you value what this church offers and what we're trying to do in the world, we need you. We can do this, if everyone does their part. The alternative, cutting our already lean budget, is not pretty, and almost certainly involves cutting back staff hours and salaries.

You're here for the meal. The bill is on the table. My name is Frank I'm your server today. So I ask you to pick up the check, and pay your part of it. There are pledge cards and envelopes in every pew. If you haven't filled out a pledge card, please do it now. Think about how much you can give. If twenty new pledgers each gave \$20 per week, we'd be there.

At stewardship time this year, I was on sabbatical, so I e-mailed Lisa and asked her to put Tracey and me down for the same amount we pledged last year. But the church needs more, and we are able to increase our pledge, so that's what we're going to do. I've written down on this index card, "Increase pledge," and I've written in an amount. If you have already pledged, and you can give more, I hope you will do this too. Take one of those index cards you'll find in the pew, write down the additional amount, and put your name on the card. During the hymn and after the service, you can bring the index cards and pledge cards up and put them in the offering plate I'll put on the Candles table.

There's a saying by Thornton Wilder: "Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow." There is so much potential here; so much good we can help grow.

In life there are moments, turning points. This is one of those moments, when we get to choose which kind of congregation we will be. Listen to Bill's words again: "I really love this church," he said. "I'm proud to call it my spiritual home. And I'm proud, too, to be part of a community that does so much great work... the truth is, how much good work this community does--and how much this church thrives--is entirely up to us."

So tell me, what do you intend to do? Which congregation do you want to be? I know which one I'm choosing. What about you?

Amen.