

It's a Wonderful Church
A Stewardship Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
By Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia
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When the Stewardship team came up with “It’s A Wonderful Church” as the annual stewardship theme I fully supported the idea – but privately I thought it might be a challenge --- after all, I’d have to make a Christmas story relevant at the end of January.

So – it’s not Christmas – but perhaps you remember what Ebenezer Scrooge, another man beset by spirits of one kind or another, said about Christmas: “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.” It is in this spirit, so to speak, that I have come to talk with you -- about What is Wonderful – How we Learn to see it, and How we can keep it all year.

No matter the time of year, it’s easy to see the consistent challenge that faces human beings. And it’s easy to lose sight of the glory of which Frank Capra spoke (in a reading heard earlier). And it’s easy to lose sight of any importance we have in the larger world. George Bailey had huge dreams – he told them to Mary as they walked home by the light of the moon: “I know what I’m going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I’m shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I’m going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then I’m coming back here and go to college and see what they know... and then I’m going to build things. I’m gonna build air fields. I’m gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I’m gonna build bridges a mile long.” But we all know that what George was able to build in that crummy little town was bigger than his young self could have anticipated. Every life was changed and lifted up in that crummy little town.

The Mr. Potters of the world think they’re so big – important. But it is the people, like George and Mary Bailey who, one small gesture at a time, and often invisibly, have ripples of impact that change the shape of the world and carry something good forward. I’m sure that each one of us has a story – maybe more than one – of someone who touched our lives in a way that seemed small at the time – but turned out to be enormous.

I remember a story that was shared with me 20-some years ago by my colleague, the Reverend Jodi Cohen Hayshida. It was about a school in a sort of poor area that had crossing guards along all the main routes that the kids would take home from school. The school began to notice that there were fewer kids using those routes than their studies had indicated. They decided to track the kids on their way home. It turned out that, rather than taking the most direct routes home after school, bunches of kids were taking a longer route. The School officials couldn’t tell why this was – there was no park, no great snack shop, ice cream parlor, not even a shopping center along the route. When they finally followed the kids they found that the attraction was an old woman who sat on her porch in the afternoon when school let out and she’d smile and wave at the kids as they walked by. The

kids told the school officials that they just felt better when they took that route and they felt drawn to it. For years, this story stuck with me as a unique example of how small gestures can really lift up lives and as an example of the ways in which communities can choose to nourish their children in so many ways – and so often don't. I spent some time, while thinking about the sermon, trying to find a recounting of that event. It took me back to the website of a program that I really like – the Search Institute's Forty Developmental Assets Program. The program simply shows how important these forms of spiritual and emotional nourishment are to the lives of developing kids. This woman on the porch of a poor neighborhood seemed to know that, while she couldn't change the whole world right at once – she could change the present and possibly the future of the kids who passed her house – just by giving them an affirmation of their self worth. There are so many kids for whom just one person, even a stranger, who reaches out, who shows interest, respect, or compassion – can make the difference between despair and the will to survive, between aimlessness and dreaming. Like the angel Clarence said "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" Then this week, I found at two other more recent stories of older women who've made it their special charge to be present to young people – waving, smiling, and letting them know that someone sees them. One was in the town of Arlington in the state of Washington where a school bus full of kids were so touched by the kind attention of the older woman in the house – grandma – they called her, that when she was absent from her window they went to check on her. Because of her steady warmth, they learned compassion. She was in the hospital but their visit and group photo of all of them on the bus helped her to recover. Then there was the story of Tinney Davidson. ***Shown on a news clip.***

And there are, of course, the impacts that you can't see clearly – the ones that happen ten, twenty years later, or have an impact on the other side of the world.

George Bailey wasn't looking for *those* results. In fact, he failed to see the results of his life at all. He knew that he was, choice by choice, year by year, doing the caring thing, the responsible thing. But in the back of his mind, he was still haunted by the bridges, the skyscrapers that he hadn't built. So when things got really tough – you know – Uncle Billy losing that eight thousand dollars, George hit rock bottom.

What saved George was that he got to see what the world would have looked like without him in it. And without him – it turned out to be a far poorer place. His parents, his brother, his wife, his children (who didn't exist), his friends, and neighbors – all their lives were so much harder -- filled with bitterness, loss, tragedy and, when he saw that suffering, he realized what love for them he had in his heart and how much he mattered and he begged to go back to his life – even if it meant going to prison on account of that 8 thousand dollars. In fact, when he walked back into his drafty old house he enthusiastically greeted the man who holds out the warrant for his arrest and said, "I'll bet it's a warrant for my arrest. Isn't it wonderful? Merry Christmas!"

He was ready to go to jail – because he finally, realized that he was truly happy with his life, with his choices, with the family, small business, and town that he loved.

George Bailey's life was a series of generous, selfless acts that added up to transforming a town. It wasn't really what he set out to do. He set out to help his brother, to save the family business, to marry the woman he love, but George Bailey he also set out to help people move from Potter's slums to their own homes. He didn't really think about creating a subdivision in his own name. He didn't really think about the businesses he was incidentally helping out, or the families he was caring about all adding up to a town transformed. Now I love what Frank Capra had to say about exalting the individual. He was really saying that every life matters – that the poorest to the wealthiest, from the high and mighty to the hoi polio – every one matters. And, at the end of the film, Capra's lesson is that if you respect people one at a time – respecting, you might say, their inherent worth and dignity, then, it weaves a community together so that no one falls through the cracks, no one is lost and alone and just so – in his hour of need – the community came together and, in compassion and love, joyfully kept George from falling through the cracks.

Here's a story from my own life – and I'll bet that the person responsible hasn't got a clue because we've been out of touch for 42 years. But in high school, as many of you may know in one form or another, my friend Marion, invited me to her Unitarian Universalist summer camp in Massachusetts. I know I've mentioned that, if it hadn't been for that camp and the good friends that I made there, I don't know if I'd be alive today. But on top of that – because of that experience, I became involved in the youth group at the UU church in Pittsburgh, I went to youth conferences, church sleepovers, and I learned about a large – faith community that cared passionately – not only about youth, but about the world – I could see it on their bulletin boards and in the lives of the members. So one night, at midnight I crept into the sanctuary with a friend and in the dim light we found the membership book at the front by the pulpit. We opened it and in a wave of gratitude for all that I had learned and been given by Unitarian Universalism, at 16 years old, I signed the book. Marion had told me that was all I needed to do to become a member.

Admittedly, it was a much too laid back path to membership. No one called me. I didn't take a membership class or understand what membership was really about – but I knew it had to do with love and commitment of some kind. And I knew I loved this faith. As a young Jewish kid from a typically dysfunctional family, an atheist, an non-conformist – I was accepted, I belonged, and I was saved – in this very life. But because no one called this kid, no asked or expected anything of me, I gradually lost sight of Unitarian Universalism until twenty years later when I attended a church service and experienced a call to the ministry. Surprised me as much as running into an angel on bridge on a snowy night. Then I remembered with clarity, the integrity, social conscience, moral sense, lovingkindness, and creedal freedom of this faith. That's how – 44 years after signing that book, I am serving this faith. And how I find myself here - where some of the most compassionate, spiritually deep and spiritually questing, intelligent, interesting, and secretly quirky people have gathered and shaped a congregation that touches hearts, awakens minds, and even saves lives. If this faith hadn't been here for me – all this time – so much would be missing from my life.

My guess is that each one of you has an aha moment about Unitarian Universalism and a reason that you come here – beyond the fact that the people are

great – you could meet them for lunch instead. But there’s something here -- if it weren’t here there’d be something important missing from your lives. Aside from the coffee... I’d like you to take just a quiet moment – relax in your chair. If you feel inclined you can let your eyes gently close. This morning you got up and came here. You hoped for, looked forward to something – important enough to get here.

Perhaps you’ve been coming for years – seen clothing and food drives, coming of age classes, children blessed, friends married, you’ve thought and felt, read and seen, dreamt and seen new buildings, you’ve eaten potlucks, auction dinners, served on committees, thought about the meaning of life, you’ve shoveled the sidewalk, talked out matters of fear and hope, sorrow and joy, reached out for help, given help, offered and discovered your gifts, you’ve seen births and deaths. Perhaps you’ve been coming for a shorter time and just settling in and discovering, or perhaps this is your first time here today and you come with your own hopes, yearning. The life of a religious community has many aspects. How would your life be different if this place wasn’t here this morning, vanished, had never been. How would your life be different? What would be missing?

In the silence imagine....if this place wasn’t here. Never had been... How would your life be different?

And if you are comfortable sharing in one or two words raise your hand and we will bring over the microphone for a moment.....

People shared so much...

And there is so much more to appreciate, to love, to celebrate because this place is here. There are so many times that it holds us, like George held his daughter Zuzu or touched the lives of so many people in significant ways.

Each of our lives matters so much. The world would be so different without each of us. The man who wrote the book from which the movie was taken was a named Philip Van Doren Stern. It’s a small book with a huge idea. Stern’s daughter, Marguerite wrote in the afterword: The Greatest Gift and It’s a Wonderful Life live on even in our day. People today still think of write, argue, and perhaps learn from those living in the fictional Bedford Falls... the film and the story have reached and influenced millions of people. I’m one of them. For three decades I have worked extensively on the development of commercial microfinance in Asia, Africa, and Latin America primarily as an advisor to banks and others providing financial services to many millions previously excluded from those services. George Bailey, Mr. Potter, Mary, Clarence, Frank Capra and of course my father have had a major effect on my life in microfinance.

So she wrote. Each one of you has been touched here, had your life changed or seen your children’s lives changed by this place. And you have changed this place yourself – with your time, your treasure, and your talent. Like Bedford Falls, this place only matters because of the people here – because of you. Every gesture of welcome and acceptance, every smile, every cup of coffee you’ve made, song you’ve sung, prayer you’ve prayed, hand you’ve held, committee you’ve attended, auction you’ve organized, decorated, attended, every pride march, peace demonstration, class... all of it only exists because each of you do. We are blessed not to be facing a bank examiner short a great sum of money our doddering uncle misplaced. Because of countless individual actions and the combined power of our energies, we are here,

today – because of those who were here before us – because of those who are here now – for those who will be here in the future. Each one of our lives matters – just as George Bailey discovered. The life we create together here – this place – Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist matters because it has the capacity to combine our energies, our purpose, our hearts, our hopes, our principles, and our power. I've seen and known many Unitarian Universalist congregations and I can tell you that this is a wonderful church. And you, as you generously shared your reflections about what would be missing from your life if this place wasn't, here also know that this place matters and this is a Wonderful Church. As we begin the season in which we renew our commitments to Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, I ask you to remember that it matters what we do and it matters what you do. It matters what you pledge and what I pledge because each of us, to the extent that we put our hearts and souls and our resources here at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, is the degree to which we will ensure that we will remain and become ever more fully and powerfully a truly, passionately, significantly wonderful Church.