

# HOW CAN ONE PERSON MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**SHIRLEY** It's a beautiful world we live in. We're surrounded by clean water, fresh air, woods, farm fields. We are lucky enough to live where we're free to be whatever we want to be, to accomplish whatever we choose to pursue. Look at all we've got!

But the picture isn't completely that rosy, once we begin to look a little closer. There are children who go to school hungry, every day. There are streams and rivers still being polluted by wasteful factories. There are the poor who can't find work. There are whales being slaughtered for their oil and elephants for their ivory. There are women set on fire by their families merely for their inability to produce male offspring. There are dogs and cats mistreated and even tortured by their owners, through ignorance or malice. There are children given no love and no nurturing care.

In a world this beautiful and this bountiful, how can all this happen? How can we make the despair and the damage and the loss stop? Maybe what we need is a super hero. A masked crusader with a cape to fly in in his batmobile or on his spiderweb to save us all from our worst selves.

## **BOB**

Shirley, there are super heroes out there in the world today, right now, working hard to come to our rescue. They go about their task without the aid of either cape or mask. They are able to transform the world, one small area at a time. Most of them are not millionaires or movie stars (but it's okay if millionaires, like Bill and Melinda Gates want to be super heroes too.)

Super heroes are not blessed with superhuman powers. They are people who see that something should be done, and they step up and do it.

Have you heard of the Starfish story? It concerns a girl walking along the beach after a big storm had washed up hundreds of starfish onto the sand. She was tossing them back into the water, one by one, when a man came by and commented that what she was doing was a big waste of her time. "They will get washed up again sometime," he said. "It doesn't make a difference." "It does to this one," she said as she tossed another starfish into the water.

Let's start on a small scale.

Meet Wendy Marcus, a 40-something woman—tall, long blonde hair and a warm smile. Wendy calls herself a bag lady. Every day she walks around her neighborhood with several plastic bags, picking up bottle caps and beer cans and McDonald wrappers to fill her plastic bags. But just keeping her own neighborhood clean wasn't enough for Wendy. She persuaded 100 fellow Texans in her town to join in her campaign, which is now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Every year, for the entire month of April, these 100 people recruit

friends and family and pick up trash and litter wherever they can for 100 minutes each. Every day for the entire month.

Such a small commitment of time for each person, but multiplied by hundreds—such a difference for our cities and for our environment. But Wendy’s influence goes far beyond that 100 minutes a day. Every person who volunteers his 100 minutes becomes aware of the change that has can be effected and continues picking up litter all year round.

**SHIRLEY** Meet another superhero—Chester Smith, a retired oil refinery worker. Twenty-four year ago, when Chester was 65 years old, Chester became a one-man lifeguard, policeman and master gardener. Twenty-four years ago on Matagorda Bay near Galveston, the brown pelicans had been nearly killed off by DDT thinning their eggshells. There were just 10 pairs of brown pelicans on the 60-acre island.

Over the next 25 years, Chester Smith tended this island. He says, “I patrolled it and done my best to ask people not to get out on the island because they’d scare the birds off their nests and the young ‘uns wouldn’t hatch. I learned how to keep the fire ants under control. We planted native trees and brush. And over the years we figured out how to keep the island from washing away.” Today, there are 1,600 nesting pairs of brown pelicans on that island. Chester Smith is now 89. He is currently one of six coastal wardens who protect the birds and keep the islands from washing away.

Read #561 – “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

**BOB**

Meet Marianne Ricciardi of Huntley, Illinois. Her 22-year-old son Pasquale was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma, a rare form of pediatric bone cancer. Pasquale died three years after his diagnosis.

His mother, Marianne, decided she needed to help other families who suffered as her family did. She wanted to help ease the huge financial burden for others. Marianne organized “Huntley Bingo” at her local American Legion hall. Every Monday night, for four years now, Marianne goes to the hall and hosts her bingo night. It costs \$10 to play a book of 108 cards and it includes a potluck dinner. The money Marianne raises goes directly to families affected by Ewing’s Sarcoma. Each week, up to 80 people from the community come to play bingo, eat dinner and socialize, all while benefitting a great cause to help ease suffering in one small corner of the world.

Read #560 – “Commitment.”

*People say, what is the sense of our small effort.*

*They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.*

*A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.*

*No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.  
There's too much work to do.*

Dorothy Day

**SHIRLEY** In Flint, Michigan, armed with a meager \$2 each, junior and senior high school students in the UU congregation set out to change the world. The eleven students in the church group were given a couple of months to develop a plan on how to best spend their money to help people. Some gave their money to the Humane Society. Some gave their money to a stranger, asking them to pay it forward. Others invested in costlier projects. Maddie, age 12, bought supplies with her \$2 to make pop-tab bracelets to sell, and the proceeds from the sales were given to Cambodian Acid Survivors Charity for acid burn victims. Gavin, age 13, bought garden sheers at a dollar store to use to clone trees by clipping branches, then allowing them to root. Gavin aims to help the environment by giving the trees away as part of his \$2 project. Andy, age 17, used his \$2 to buy a Rainbow Knot badge to show support for an inclusive Boy Scouts of America. Omid, age 14, plans to launch a Kickstarter campaign to fund a beautification project in his neighborhood.

Amazing kids changing a small part of the world, with only \$2.

**BOB**

Here's a similar story from a Washington, DC, congregation of about 150 members. The leader one Sunday asked the congregation to check their programs. Ten of them would find a randomly inserted blue card. She asked those ten to stand up. Each blue card was a golden ticket, of sorts. There was a collective gasp of surprise from the congregation when the ten people standing were each given an envelope. Inside the envelope? Just one \$100 bill. The windfall was a Thanksgiving experiment in generosity. The leader gave the people who held the envelopes one month to pass the money along in some way that would make a difference in a person's life. Later, they reported back on what turned out to be a surprisingly complex challenge of giving away someone else's money.

One woman said, "At first it seemed like there was a million things you could do with it. But the amount seemed to shrink. How could we best make a difference with just \$100?"

She considered everything from the random-act-of-kindness approach (making the day for ten panhandlers) to the drop-in-the-bucket donation at the Animal Rescue League. She even thought of giving it to a political campaign, but she decided any candidate who still needed \$100 in late October was probably beyond help. Eventually, unable to decide, she added \$100 of her own and split the gift between a craft cooperative for homeless women in the District and a tiny grass-roots lobbying shop working to end mountaintop coal mining. She said, "I decided it had to be a small enough group that \$100 would make a difference."

One recipient of the envelope gave his \$100 as a first birthday present to the daughter of a political activist he admires, hoping the money would help pay the bills of an idealistic-

but struggling young family. Another person donated the \$100 to D.C. Thrive, a homeless aid organization, and got a friend to donate another \$100.

A visitor to the church on that particular Sunday was surprised to be given cash. She reported later by email that she had sent her money to Heifer International. There, \$100 can provide a family in the developing world with a goat or three hives of honeybees or a fifth share of a milk cow. Another recipient immediately mailed the money to her mother's neighbor in Annapolis, an elderly retiree who is living "Check to check."

For another recipient, giving away the money became a family project. With guidance from their ten-year-old son, they bought a cartload of new toys at Target and dozens of children's books. Now their house is filled with bundles destined for twenty families fleeing domestic violence with help from the District Alliance for Safe Housing.

Another recipient wanted to give her \$100 to the Polaris Project, a group that provides housing and help to victims of human trafficking. But she didn't think \$100 was enough. So she executed a minor fundraising blitz among members of her discussion group, increasing the total she could donate to \$700.

**SHIRLEY** When Bob first heard this story, he emailed it to me. Both of us loved what this church had done and we both thought, why don't we do that right here? So we did.

Please look at the back of your Order of Service. Ten of you will find a green dot. Please raise your hand if there is a green dot on the back of your program.

Today, you are being given the opportunity to become a superhero. Cape and mask will be optional. Bob has just given you an envelope. Please open it.

(PAUSE – RECOGNIZE THE TEN PEOPLE)

You have just been given \$100. What we are asking you to do is to think about—really think about—what you can do with \$100 that will make a difference in someone's life. It's not an easy thing to think about. If you're helping here with \$100, you're not helping somewhere else. Which is more worthy? It's your choice to make. Decide on your own criteria for giving that money away. Take your time.

Then, give the money away.

We are also asking you to keep a journal of sorts to record your thinking about all this. Write down how you finally came to your decision, who or what you used the \$100 for. If you can, record the result of what happened because your \$100 was given. How did your \$100 make a difference? Or how do you believe it will make a difference. Next year, we'd like to hear your story in a Sunday service.

**BOB**

It's quite likely that coming to your decision and giving the money away, seeing how it makes a difference, will make more of an impact on YOU than on who you give the money to. It's an exciting, but difficult task.

If you were not one of the ten people with an envelope today, don't let that stop you from joining in. Take \$100 from your own pocket and make a decision, based on careful thinking, on how you will give it away. Let Shirley or me know that you're a part of our project. Keep your journal. Let us know the results. Shirley will be organizing the Sunday services where you'll report back to the congregation.

What a difference ONE PERSON can make!

(I would like to note that the source of the money given to you for this project did not come from the UUFR account but was donated for the purpose of this project.)