



UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
ASSOCIATION

The Guy on the Bus

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[Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton](#)

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When I was in the later years of grade school I began taking the bus to the mall on weekends. I loved to watch movies, so I'd get the local bus schedule and see when I'd need to be at the bus stop to catch the one that went to the mall. I'd plan on seeing a movie and playing a few video games and look at the schedule again to see which bus I would need to catch home. We lived in an apartment complex that was sort of in the suburbs where the busses did not run very often at all. Everything had to be timed out, or you could end up waiting a long time; possibly hours, for the next bus to come your way.

And the bus fares, which were cash only then, had to be figured out in advance as well. The fare getting there was pretty simple; I either had it or I didn't, and if I didn't I couldn't go anywhere to begin with. But once at the mall, I was always worried that after the movie, some snacks, and some video games, I wouldn't have enough cash for the bus fare home. I worried that I would accidentally spend down into that return fare, and that I would be stuck at the mall.

So I got in the habit of, before I even left home, putting enough bus money for the ride home in my left pocket, and never using it while I was at the mall. I could spend what I had in my right pocket down to the last penny if I wanted to, but I would never spend what was in my left pocket. It was always the fare plus a little extra, just in case. It was never to be spent until it was dropped into the little metal and glass container next to the driver who would drive me several miles before delivering me a few hundred yards from my home. It was my safety blanket; that little bit of money in my left pocket. It meant I could get home, quickly, easily, and safely.

And so you can imagine the startle that I felt one day, after watching the movie Ghostbusters (the original), having some popcorn, and playing Pole Position, my favorite racecar game, at the arcade, when I stepped aboard

the bus and reached into me left pocket for my bus fare and found the pocket empty. There was no money there. I knew there was no money in my right pocket either, but I stepped out of the way of the people behind me and checked anyway. I checked my back pockets and my jacket pockets and there was no money anywhere. I had no idea what to do. The line had cleared by then and the driver was watching me frantically patting my pockets for money. I was ready to wave him on and start a long walk home that would end with my parents probably being quite hesitant to let me keep taking these trips to see movies; trips I really enjoyed.

But before the driver could close the door, the last man to board the bus, who was still standing close to the fare box, looked at me and said, "I got you." He was dressed in jeans and a brown work shirt. I remember thinking that he probably worked maintenance at the mall and was headed home. And he saw and registered the mess that I was in, and with a simple "I got you," he put my fare in the box so that I could go home. I said "Thank you so much" to him, to which he replied, "No Problem," and he did that smooth, quiet, head-nod thing that made him seem really cool to me. He then sat down and read a book, while I sat opposite him on the bus. We didn't say another word to each other until we reached his stop, which was before mine. As he stood to leave, I said, "Thanks again," and he gave another cool guy head nod, and that was the first and last time I saw him.

But he has stayed with me; he and his, "I got you." He got that I was a stuck kid and needed help. He got that something had gone wrong somewhere and I was in a tricky situation. He got that he had a few bucks that could help tremendously, and he parted with that money quickly and with no more flash than a head nod. I thought that I was independent; he got that I wasn't. Not really. I may have been a kid who could manage a bus trip to a mall, but there would be times when I would need help getting home; times when I couldn't do it alone; times when I would need the kindness of strangers to get me where I needed to go, safely and with ease. I thought I was independent and would be able to manage that journey and any other journey of life I wanted to take, alone. He got how wrong that was. And through his actions he taught me what he got; what he knew; what he had probably learned in innumerable ways over his

years; that we are all in this together; that we have to be each other's keepers; that we have to give away the goodness we hold without exception, without reservation, as limitlessly and luminously as possible.

His act was an act of ministry, far more alike than unlike the kinds of acts that we, as a faith and as a congregation, create in the world. We too bear witness to fear and confusion. We too see people who find their anticipated journeys through life blocked by obstacles, and unlike whatever happened to me at the mall, those obstacles often having nothing to do with their own creation. We too know that sometimes something goes wrong. And like him, we too know life to be an interdependent enterprise, and that we are elementally interconnected with everyone else on the bus, in the mall, and in homes and places everywhere. And we know that if we can help, we should.

And we too know that sometimes we are not the wise-gift giver, but the one in need of the gift. For we have all known the fear and despair and sadness that have caused us to sink down. We have all had obstacles placed before us that we could not move ourselves. We have all worshipped our own imagined independence to the point of making it an idol, only to have our pockets, or spirits, or hearts, or hope go empty at the wrong time. And in those anxious moments, as we've found again that we're really not in control of life, and that we are not as independent as we thought we were, we know that others have helped us through. There will be times when what gets us through life's most difficult moments is the kindness, the compassion, the empathy, and the love of another; sometimes of someone we know, sometimes of a strangers along the way.

Our faith teaches us to be that giving person, be we friends, families, or strangers in relation to the recipients. Our faith also teaches us to receive those same gifts of others with gratitude. And everything that we do here; every ministry that we enliven, is centered in those two expressions of our faith. In our justice ministries, in how we teach our kids, in how we learn together, in the spirit that we create in worship, in the pastoral care that we offer one another, in the fellowship that strengthens and connects us;

every ministry here is one in which we give of ourselves and our gifts to the world as others bless and strengthen us. Each act connects us more deeply with one another and the world. Each act build us anew as people better able to transform the isolation and fear that is, but ought not to be, into something hopeful and connected. Each act of ministry here strengthens and equips us to live our faith beyond these walls, in ways that bless far beyond our knowledge.

We know that too often in the world, the message is that someone without bus fare is stuck, even if they're a kid. We know that so often the message is that someone who is sad should get over it, or that someone who is oppressed should just try harder, or that a victim of anything unjust is to be blamed for being a victim. We know that so often the message is that those with plenty have no obligation to those with not enough, and that those who are safe have no obligation to create more safety, and that those who are well-fed have no obligation to feed others.

We know that so often these days, the professed gospel of America is a profane distortion of any kind of moral sentiment that values all life and respects all people. Empathy is sneered at. Compassion is mocked. The strong persecute the weak and pat themselves on the backs for doing it, and tragically, often some of those assuring hands are attached to religious leaders. Intelligence is ignored while hyperbole is front-page news, and the very idea of truth is under attack by those who claim any representation of it that offends their opinions isn't real.

And as this happens, people stand before the bus of hope and compassion, frozen in fear and anxiety, unsure of what to do and where to go. And like that stranger of my childhood, our congregation and our faith say to those people standing there, "We got you." Stewardship is our way of saying, "We got you. Your fare has been paid by those who've come before. Come on board, sit down, and take a rest. You, the stranger, you, the sad, you, the fearful, you, who feels alone; your fare has been paid by people of faith who've built these walls and built these ministries and built this faith of hope and love. Many of them aren't even here anymore. Many

have died, and yet their gifts live in ministries that exist to welcome, strengthen, and bless you.

So come here and know love. Come here and know hope. Come here and know that you are not alone. We got you, as others earlier had us. And once you're on the bus, and you have your bearings, and you have some hope and a sense of your own voice and strength, know that you can get others too. Here, in this house, you'll be surrounded by people committed not to reflecting the profanities of this world, but to transforming them into moments of beauty and goodness. You'll be able, with our strength and shared inspiration, to bring others aboard so that they find warmth and inspiration, riders who in turn will share that with even more people. You'll be able to, having had your fare paid by those who've come before, pay the fares of those to come, so that this house of love and hope welcomes everyone who seeks its comfort, wisdom, and community."

And now in particular is the time when people really need that. Now is the time when people need to be reminded of goodness, hope, and the broad call for justice that never stops sounding, even when the winds of oppression are howling. Now more than ever, people need to be able to lean into the strength and vision of our congregation and faith to find their balance and build their hope, so that they can move into a frightening world with faith, courage, and the strength of many.

Stewardship in the life of a congregation is about building the church that proclaims this new way of being and practices it every day. And each gift of every level better equips us to serve more people with our faith. In Stewardship, the money that we pledge is really about the hope that we will build, and the compassion that we will share, and the love that we will sound into a world polluted by far too many words of hatred. Now more than ever is the time for our congregation's and larger faith's message and ministries in the world. Now is the time for our liberal religious voice to sound over all waters and across all lands. Now, when messages unlike ours dominate the airwaves, is the time for our gospel to be proclaimed from the mountaintops and valley bottoms.

Now is the time to pledge to pay someone else's fare; to pledge to pay as many fares as possible, because there are multitudes struggling with fear and isolation. And we too have felt the anxiety of those difficult spaces and know that it was only because someone else paid our fare that we have this warm and welcoming community to call home. Someone; many people really, years and years ago, looked into the future, imagined our lives, and some with elegant words, and some with casual head nods, put money down so that we could come home. It's our turn to do the same, as generously as we possibly can.

Each gift calls someone home to a place of faith, hope, and love; a place that can strengthen them for the journey, and connect them with other travelers. Each gift is a silent head nod, or an effusive, warm welcome, to someone who needs the same gifts we've received here, and the same gifts we have to offer. Each gift is the fare of someone, perhaps a kid, away from home and a little scared, who would be blessed by our digging deep and sharing our faith.

May we give generously, "getting" others as many have "gotten" us. May we look at the fearful and lonely, the sad and imprisoned; those in a strange land unsure of where and what home is, and say, "We got you."

May it be so, and Amen.