

Leaving it Forward
Creating a Future for Others

By

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As we celebrate our annual *Legacy Sunday*, keep in mind it's about something greater than our church endowment fund. Not that I'm shy about promoting our endowment fund. It's important and I'm extremely grateful to everyone who has contributed to it or has promised to contribute to it in their wills, those still with us and those who are not. The endowment helps sustain our mission. Since reaching our goal of a half-million dollars three years ago, it has added about \$30,000 to our budget, and will add another \$26,000 to next year's budget. Today it's grown to about \$640,000. Thank you, Endowment Team. And, again, thanks to all the members of our Legacy Society who contribute to the endowment.

Yet I also want to point out that contributing to our endowment fund is based on a principle and value that is often overlooked in our greater society and world. Indeed, it is so remote from our thinking there's no standard way of putting it. It's not like "freedom," or "reason," or, "democracy," that we know what it means and feel its sanctity upon the utterance of but one hallowed word. It is an elusive principle that we feel only nebulously when it's absent: a sentiment that is understood mostly in retrospect. "Geez, I wish I had thought of that before now." "We should have planned better." Or, for those who suffer from the consequences of our shortsightedness, "What were they thinking?" "How could they have been so irresponsible?" "Why didn't they see this coming?" "They just didn't care."

We need only consider global warming and the environmental disaster now upon us to grasp what I'm talking about. It should come as no surprise because we've known about the green house effect for more than a hundred years; scientists began warning us it was happening more than half a century ago; and we have been witnessing its frightening and undeniable impacts for the past few decades. I won't call them *chilling*, not because the word doesn't exactly work with *warming*, but because the powers-that-be have worked almost tirelessly to ignore and deny it. So, for the status quo, there's nothing chilling about it. It presents no reason to change our way of doing things. The status quo cares only about now, about this moment in history, not about the future of others, or even if history itself should continue. The status quo is to make sure the future remains just like now.

But ignoring this sacred principle isn't only because of negligence and selfishness. I suspect its more often out of necessity and desperation. The reality is that throughout much of civilized history, marked by the advent of agriculture, most people have lived hand to mouth. We haven't been living under economies of plenty but of scarcity: not of sustainability but of bear subsistence. Since then, most people haven't been able to plan for, or even impact the future, because they have necessarily had to focus on surviving the day, which nowadays

means worrying about paying this month's rent or mortgage, the bills, and just having enough to eat for the kids, something to fill their hungry bellies, whether it's healthy food or not. Healthy food is a luxury many can't afford to worry about at this time.

In agrarian societies, which is what our entire world has become, there has always been a few of us with great wealth, and the rest of us who are just getting by. This was the basis of economist Thorstein Veblen's 1899 book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which outlined the ways in which the most menial and labor-intensive jobs are relegated to people subjugated by those who do the least. It's why philosophers like Plato and Aristotle looked down upon the working class, because they saw labor as a corrupt waste of time, meant for unintelligent people who need to be led by those who can afford to sit around and think all day. It's why the Greek word for "work," *ponos*, also means, "pain." It's why the powers-that-be combated the global labor movement of the 20th century with the Red Scare, McCarthyism, and a globalized Cold War that we're still working our way through. It's at least partly to blame for the, so-called, War on Terror, and for the more recent Occupy movement and Arab Spring. It's why income inequality is a major political issue right now. Throughout history, William Herzog says, "advanced agrarian societies were two-tiered. The top tier was occupied by the ruler, the ruling class, retainers, and a few merchants. The bottom tier was occupied by peasants, artisans, merchants, the unclean and the degraded, and, at the very bottom, the lowest of the lows, the expendables,"¹ those who meant absolutely nothing. Throughout civilized history, the great majority of people have been on the bottom tier.

Today, fortunately, the number of those living in extreme poverty is lower than ever, and most of us have access to technologies, like indoor plumbing and the Internet, that make yesterday's tycoons look like paupers, to a degree. In 1800, 85-percent of us lived in extreme poverty. By 1966 it was down to 50-percent. Today, globally, it's only 9-percent.² As a result, for example, according to Hans Rosling's book, *Factfulness*, in "1972, Bangladeshi women had on average seven children and life expectancy was 52. Today, Bangladeshi women have two children and a newborn can expect to live for 73 years."³ So things have gotten and are getting better for billions of people, but most are still living hand to mouth, meaning they may have enough to get by on, but are still, essentially, subsistence farmers. They remain only one economic disaster—the loss of a job, an economic recession, sudden inflation, a costly illness—from losing everything.

All of this is to say that financial planning for people throughout history and to this day is a luxury most cannot afford. We may want better things for our kids and grandkids, and even for those decedents we'll never know, but how many can afford to worry much beyond right now? So human history has been dominated by those who either don't worry about the future because they have enough, some of whom won't buck the status quo, or, mostly, by

¹ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Westminster/John Knox Pres, Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 59.

² Rosling, Hans, *Factfulness*, Flat Iron Book, New York, NY, 2018, p. 52.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

people who simply don't have the luxury *to* worry about it. In both cases, people don't concern themselves about the future because it's costly. Taking care of tomorrow is expensive.

Another facet of the problem is that those among us who legitimately can't afford to worry about the future also have little choice but to participate in behaviors and systems that impair it. Let's take our overuse of plastic, for example. We use hundreds of millions of tons of plastic around the world every year, about half of which is single-use plastic, meaning it goes straight into the garbage. The problem, as we all know, is that it takes somewhere from a few hundred to about a thousand years for it to decompose, and it's causing lots of problems for lots of people, animals, and environments, especially the ocean, in the meantime.

Some of you may remember that I've been saving my non-compostable garbage for a year, since Earth Day last April. Today, about two-thirds way through the project, I have over 20 large boxes containing either paper and cardboard, cans and metals, glass, and plastic wrappers and containers. About 80 percent of it is plastic. Much of it is supposed to be recyclable, but I also know less than 10 percent of the world's plastic actually gets recycled.

So how has this awareness changed my shopping habits? Hardly at all. I certainly feel a lot more guilt about everything I buy and am not exactly smitten with our ever-fattening plastic house guest, but it turns out almost everything we buy these days comes wrapped in single-use plastic. Single-use plastic is the ticket that gains us access not only to today's luxuries, but to most of our basic needs. Most food, including produce, comes in plastic containers wrapped in plastic. Loose fruits, vegetables, and bulk foods are accompanied by reels of conveniently located plastic bags to put them in. Tools, toothpaste, shampoo and soap, vitamins, medicine, lightbulbs, and so much else comes in plastic wrappers or containers. So if I want access to any of these ordinary things, the things that make life convenient, as well as genuine necessities, I've got to remain part of the problem. Whether I live with my garbage or throw it away (which I'm looking forward to doing again), I'm reluctantly engaging in behavior detrimental to the future.

All of this, again, is to suggest it isn't usual for most of us to consider our responsibility to the inhabitants and habitats of the future, either because we don't want to, or, more likely, because we can't afford to or are systemically powerless to do so. Caring about the future, being responsible for the future, is overwhelming, costly, and often something we've just learned not to think about.

This is why the principle behind our endowment fund and those comprising our Legacy Society are worthy of raising up during an annual church service. It means we're doing the hard work, the costly work, the rare work, of thinking about our responsibility to the future of this congregation and to new members that some of us will never know. Few of us know

any of the names of those who founded our church in 1887, or anything else about them. Yet we are their legacy. We are here today because they put systems and resources into place to make sure our church survived without them.

Having an endowment fund that not only helps sustain us now, but also preserves its principle in perpetuity, meaning we're committed to not spending it, is an intentional expression of this nebulous principle so few of us ever think about—caring for the future, caring for people we'll never even know, and who will likely ever even know our names. I'm calling it "leaving it forward," similar to the idea of "paying it forward," that we are familiar with.

Paying it forward means doing something good for someone because somebody else has done so for us. *Leaving it forward*, to me, means not using up all our resources for ourselves now so others can use them later. That's why I say it's a principle that's about more than our endowment fund, though our endowment demonstrates this principle. If throughout our agrarian history people had been leaving it forward instead of scraping and scrapping to get by, global warming wouldn't be an issue today. If we had been leaving it forward all along, we wouldn't just be celebrating the near end of extreme poverty today—which is low hanging fruit—because we wouldn't be dealing with poverty at all. If we had been leaving it forward, just by thinking a few years, or only weeks, or just a few days forward, then we wouldn't still be in war in Iraq and Afghanistan after nearly two decades, and we wouldn't about to be at war with Iran. Leaving it forward means considering the welfare of tomorrow's generations. It means spending our thoughts, our energy, and our resources and wealth, to make sure people we'll never know have what they need—health, wealth, and peace.

In my opinion every church, as a matter of spiritual discipline and integrity, should have an endowment. It doesn't matter how small or large it is, because that's not what an endowment is about. It's about walking our talk. As people of faith, no matter the faith, compassionately incarnating our beliefs requires us to care for the welfare of all beings, not just those alive today, but those who will be here in the morrow. Many religions instruct us to be kind to strangers. *Leviticus*, the Hebrew book of laws, says we should love them as ourselves, "for you once were strangers in Egypt"⁴ Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."⁵ The Apostle Paul said, "Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."⁶ The children of tomorrow may be strangers to us, strangers we will never know, yet we inhabit their Earth, and we establish their economy, and we are responsibly for their welfare. We must be kind to these strangers by endowing them with all the promise we can manage to create for them today.

⁴ Leviticus 19:33-34

⁵ Matthew 25:35

⁶ Hebrews 13:2

When I came here almost nine years ago, our endowment was about \$180,000, which some understandably thought was too much given we had financial needs it could have been used for then. But the Endowment Team and I started dreaming bigger. We began thinking about waiting until it reached \$500,000 before ever taking advantage of its gains. In this way, rather than spending it all at once, which wouldn't last long, it could help sustain us every year from now on, which, as I said, has already amounted to more than \$50,000 to our budget in only three years. Who knows what this extraordinary gift, the thoughtful act of kindness toward strangers, this spiritual discipline of compassion for others, will contribute to our members a hundred years from now?

Recently I've been dreaming about what it would be like to built it \$10,000,000, so our church could use it to help sustain the social justice work going on in our greater community. Some think it sounds impossible, but that's how some felt just a few years ago when we began aiming for only half a million. But I believe it's a worthy goal, and not an entirely impossible dream. There are people in our church, but also in Spokane who would appreciate an opportunity to know their financial donations aren't single-use gifts, but could be used to help sustain the work and organizations they care about far into the future. So I say let's dream big.

But, for now, our endowment, our practice of endowing the future, isn't the only point of today's message. It is an example of this relatively rare practice of thinking ahead, of thinking about the welfare of strangers, of bearing the cost of a future than isn't ours, rather than making our descendants pay the price for our shortsightedness. Whether we're able to contribute to our church endowment fund or not, this principle of leaving it forward is a moral value all of us, no matter our circumstances, ought to consider. It means leaving the entire planet richer and healthier than when we found it. How does what we do now impact the lives of those who come later? How can what we do now make their lives better? It is unlikely the children of our future will ever benefit from what we leave behind if we haven't first considered what we are leaving forward.