

MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

What are the things that we do that really make a difference?

We each make our mark in the world. Even if we decide to go off grid, we leave a trail of contacts and connections, moments when our lives have intersected with the lives of others. People on the other side of the world may never know about us, but in our own land and especially among our friends and family, we leave a mark. Some of us may leave a more dramatic impression for good or ill, but we all leave a mark.

Those of us who have left the ordinary behind and ventured into riskier territory physically, philosophically, or religiously might make more of a difference than others at times, but each of us has been a friend, a co-worker, a student peer, an acquaintance of many other people in our lifetimes. Many of us have created, raised, are raising, or will raise families. All of us came from some family situation, good or bad. Each of us has made decisions about the role that families play now and will play in the rest of our lives. Each of us has made decisions about work and leisure time activities. Each of us has made decisions about the things we consider important and the focus of our lives.

Even when we decide not to decide, even when we refrain from doing anything, we are making a difference. When we make a decision, take an action, or really commit our time and energy to something, we will make much more of a difference, but our inaction can help to end projects and ideas that someone thought were worth doing.

This sermon is really about intentionality and commitment, but I think it is helpful to remind ourselves that even when we do nothing we are having an impact somewhere. As I recall, Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., each had something to say to those who didn't do something positive in the face of suffering, hunger, and injustice. But I want to focus today on the things we can do rather than on all the things we haven't done or won't do.

Most of us have resources that allow us to do things our grandparents would never have imagined. We have lots more stuff, amazing electronic gadgets, phones without wires, hybrid cars, almost affordable airfares, movies we can watch on our phones or tablets or computers, all kinds of stuff not available in earlier times. We also have leisure time, something unknown to many earlier generations. Often we have hours each day that we can choose to spend in any number of ways. Whether we spend them wasting time in front of some kind of screen or doing something useful is entirely up to us! And to be fair, many of us need some time for relaxation in front of a screen where we don't have to think too much.

We each have different things that we are concerned about, programs, projects, people, and organizations for which we will send in money, sign e-mail letters, or even give time and effort. We each have our own reasons for choosing the differing programs and organizations that we support. Whatever we do for our organizations does make a difference and there are thousands if not millions of worthy programs, causes, and organizations. There are also some organizations, causes, and programs that are scams, frauds, or just plain bad. We need to be somewhat cautious in choosing causes and groups that we can be confident are working for the common good, a better world, or some higher value. We want the things we support to agree with our values and to be doing the things we choose to support. We want them to be making a positive difference just as we want to make a positive difference in the things we choose to do.

For many of us, the differences that we make in the world are small ones. Few of us have been or want to be at the head of a movement for change. Most of us do not seek the limelight but would rather work in the background, steadily accomplishing the things that need to be done at our own pace and in our own time. I think this is really how most changes in the world come, not by dramatic solitary moments but by the inexorable flow of time and the work of hundreds, thousands, millions of people who come to see things differently. Many civil and human rights matters have been resolved not by the dramatic demonstrations and court rulings but by new generations seeing all people as deserving equal treatment and choosing to treat all people with respect.

We are not all the way to equal treatment for persons of color, women, or GLBTQ persons, but younger generations just don't see the differences that previous generations did. And that in and of itself, makes a difference. Previous generations helped to create a climate of greater acceptance in the face of prejudices built into nations and constitutions and modes of governance and the relationship between the sexes. It was the younger generations who chose to set aside the prejudices of the past and to treat people more fairly, more compassionately, more justly.

What our parents taught us, and what we teach our children really does make a difference. It may be the most important thing we do! Our direct influence in our cities and nations may be fleeting, but what we pass down to future generations may be vital for the survival of humanity into the future. We will likely never know how much of a difference we have made for future generations. No matter how many big decisions we have made, it may be the way we have treated those around us that really makes a difference. Some of the decisions of a few Presidents, Admirals and Generals and Popes may be recorded for posterity, but most of the things we do will soon be forgotten. What matters is that we have helped to increase the humanity of our species, that we have called for respect and acceptance rather than violence and destruction. It is in that light that we may make the biggest difference of all even if we never see it.

Now there are any number of places we can choose to donate our time and effort, any number of important causes, any number of people who could use our help, and there are any number of places where we can make a difference. It is the choices we make that will make all the difference. Throughout our lives, there are all kinds of things we can do to shape a better world, but the most important decision of all is the decision that we are going to do something. Until we decide we are actually going to do something, that endless list of possibilities is just too overwhelming, but once we decide that we are going to get involved it is easy. There are always jobs for volunteers and the need for people who want to make things better has never gone away! Churches used to depend on women who weren't working. We still depend on women, but fewer and fewer women are able to stay home, so churches have been experiencing a shortage of volunteers for years.

Other helping organizations also have had to turn over more responsibility to paid employees because there haven't been enough volunteers. The needs of people in today's world are as great as in many other eras. Hunger is rampant even in this country and homelessness is a huge problem exacerbated by endless wars and the lack of mental health assistance. AIDS and a variety of other diseases continue to plague many parts of the world. The growing disparity between rich and poor in this country and around the world, and the way that the wealthy control decisions over health care, jobs, and international relations is profoundly troubling. How can those of us who are struggling to get by make an impact on the political processes currently in play. Few in the middle class and below can even think about running for office, and the wealthy continue to make decisions that favor their own class far more than the poor or those in the middle.

If those of us in the middle classes manage to retain the vote we may eventually be able to choose leaders who are more aware and concerned about the poor, but new efforts to disenfranchise the poor and minorities have been observed over the last several years, especially in the southeast. These times are not auspicious for bettering the situation of the poor or the middle classes. Even the limited progress toward national health care that Obamacare represents is being assailed by wealthy Republicans who for whatever reason do not want to see the poor have healthcare. The need for political activism may present the greatest opportunity to make a difference at the current juncture, but it is not entirely clear if anything can change the position of the Tea Party at the present time.

It is easy to get discouraged in the face of entrenched efforts such as those by the Tea Party to offer the poor neither health care nor a living wage and then to blame the poor for their own limitations and failings. It is far harder for someone to go from the projects in Chicago to success in school and college than for all the children of middle class and wealthy families. Increased costs for student loans, decreased support for education at all levels, and the failure to fund health care and a living wage continues to make the situation worse. Fighting for the poor in the political arena is one area that needs many people who want to make a difference, though success must be measured one little step at a time.

Such struggles have been going on throughout history and the history of these United States, and the solution may not come any time soon.

Nonetheless, the need is great to stand up for the poor and for those whose rights are being infringed for political and economic gain. If we truly believe in justice, equality, and the inherent worth of each person, and that we are all connected in the web of life, we cannot just stand by and watch, we need to try to make a difference.

Through politics and through direct services such as counseling and food programs and shelters, there are so many needs and so many ways that we can make a difference. There are also all kinds of programs to make the world better, care for stray animals, clean up polluted areas, preserve wetlands and generally care for the earth. Some of us are more comfortable dealing with animals and the natural world than with people, but all of these programs offer the hope and promise of a better and healthier world for all living beings and for the future.

Working for peace and justice, for a healthier and more beautiful world, for the health of the animals wild and domestic, of the lakes and rivers and the forests, and for the planet itself is spiritual work. It is work we should undertake with intention and commitment. It is work that is good for our souls and for the world. It is the work that does make a difference, that brings harmony to the universe and peace to our spirits. It is the work to which we are all called as Unitarian Universalists, for it is the work of our values and Principles.

We will not solve all the problems of the world quickly nor likely even within our lifetimes, but we will make a difference by the commitment we model and the steps we accomplish. Even our words and good intentions may help to inspire others. Each of us can make a difference, and together we will shape a better world! So May it Be! Amen!