

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 Mother's Day ~ 8 May, 2016

### **Make Yourself Useful**

*To the memory of Marion Agnes Drew Kirschbaum*

Every morning, now, as I stand at the bathroom sink, brushing my teeth, I catch my reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror and say out loud, "Good morning, Nana!"

It shouldn't surprise me to grow up into my grandmother, though I might have had a younger version in mind. Notwithstanding, I loved her, and it does me good to see her again. The sturdy and devoted daughter of an industrious Yankee farmer, she molded herself to him, and I, at best, to her. What a blessing to know that those who have gone before us live on through us.

One Sabbath day, the doctor had to be summoned, as she had accidentally taken a seat on her crocheting, impaling herself. She paid absolutely no attention to the lesson this was supposed impart; unfailingly, for her entire life, she sat in church every Sunday morning, her hands busy with the work spread out in her lap, pausing only to take up the hymnal, stand, and sing in a high, thin, warbly soprano. Idle hands, she said, were the devil's playground.

It was she who taught me to give thanks by giving; to remember those less fortunate by making myself useful. I can hear her saying it, though I can't seem to get the tone right: "Kimme, make yourself useful." It was not a stern command; it was a blessing, the blessing imparted to one who has the wherewithal and the resources to be of use. A Bible verse was scribbled on little scraps of paper and left for me to find:

Luke 12:48: *Of the one to whom much is given, much is expected.*

I remember being quite small, standing beside her in my great aunt Kaye's kitchen where the humidity rivaled the heat, drying Ball jars and lids with a dishrag as she as she and her sister canned fruit from the orchard. I

remember pasting her S&H green stamps into the little booklet that came from the grocery store. I remember, as her legs began to tire, running upstairs or down for her. I remember reading the fine print for her, opening her prescription medicine bottles, driving her to visit a friend. “Kimme, make yourself useful.” I hope you, too, cherish memories like these, having been invited to be of use and so coming to know your usefulness.

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This is a powerful poem written by 29-year-old Audra who was raised by her single mother, Margaret,<sup>1</sup> in tough neighborhoods in Chicago and Los Angeles. Margaret’s signature tag-line to her daughter was, “I refuse to let the streets have you.” The poem is called *Mother Margaret*.

Words could never describe what that woman has done for me.

How she begged, cried, and almost died  
all just to make sure that in my youth  
I’d hold a book, and not a baby;  
that I’d embrace a pen, and not a gun;  
that I’d appreciate the life G\*d gave me  
and the way G\* d saved me.

And she did this alone, by herself....

That lady’s tear’s kept me clean,  
her eyes saw through me,  
her arms embraced me,  
her hands kept me straight,  
her heart gave me faith,  
and her life gave me life,  
all so that one day,  
I’d make others see her love  
through me.

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Project manager Dustin Wax writes, “All of us want to be useful, ... to feel needed, competent....” To make ourselves useful, Dustin Wax recommends that we show up; jump in; solve the problem before us – not the problem that led to the one that led to the one that led to this one. We should share what we know; and give willingly (even if we’re “supposed” to). To be useful, be curious; listen and affirm; teach, don’t tell; know when to

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<sup>1</sup> I’m sorry I couldn’t surface their surname. Can you (please and thank you!)? I edited the poem (which appears variously on the Internet) for clarity.

stop; and don't take over. He concludes that what makes us useful is our attitude, and making] people we help feel better about themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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Brainline.org hosts a blog written by people living with traumatic brain injury. In a beautiful piece on usefulness in her “new normal,” Kara Swanson reminds us that everyone can be of use. “... Many brain injury survivors write to me believing ... they are no longer useful,” she says. “[It] seems we lose what we were able to do, and, suddenly, we measure ourselves as having lost our worth, our usefulness.... [But] ... looking at what we can no longer do, ... we’ve been looking at things all wrong....” Kara Swanson shares her spiritual practice of looking in on the lives of friends who are as crazy busy as she was before her accident, and making up ways to make their lives easier.

“One of them works long days, ... so I do his laundry,” she writes. “[For another who] works long days, ... I go [pet and] feed her cat.... I’ll pick up and drop off lunch for someone too busy to leave work, or take packages ... to the post office for someone who can’t make it there before they close.... [I try to help busy people with research on new meds they’re taking. For a friend who] has ... sore hands from arthritis, ... I open jars....

“None of [this has] anything to do with the catering career I lost to my injury,” she continues.... [But] while doing any of them, I [know I’m not] worthless or unimportant or no longer valid.... When someone needs me, ... they sure don’t care that I can no longer work a twenty-hour day choreographing someone’s wedding. And the best part is, neither do I. I’m helping ... [I’m] vital ... and it feels fabulous.”<sup>3</sup>

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For those of us blessed with sound minds, the ante is upped. How can we be of use? Out for a run in the woods behind the Old North Bridge in Concord, a huge tree that had fallen across the trail forced me from the path into a swamp. A few weeks later, as I approached the same spot, I heard the low whining of a chainsaw. An older gentleman was clearing the wreckage. These are public lands – lands held in the public trust, the common wealth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dustin Wax, *How to Make Yourself Useful*. Please see [lifhack.org/articles/communication/how-to-make-yourself-insanely-useful.html](http://lifhack.org/articles/communication/how-to-make-yourself-insanely-useful.html)

<sup>3</sup> Please see [karaswanson.wordpress.com](http://karaswanson.wordpress.com); reposted at [brainline.org/content/2010/09/here-make-yourself-useful\\_pageall.html](http://brainline.org/content/2010/09/here-make-yourself-useful_pageall.html)

<sup>4</sup> Massachusetts is a Commonwealth. “In the era leading to 1780, a popular term for a whole body of people constituting a nation or state (the body politic) was the word

I was moved and grateful that the anonymous forester had taken it upon himself to be of use.

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Poet Marge Piercy begins her poem *To Be of Use*,

The people I love the best  
 jump into work head first  
 without dallying in the shallows  
 and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
 They seem to become natives of that element,  
 the black sleek heads of seals  
 bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
 who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
 who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
 who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
 in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
 and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
 who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
 who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
 but move in a common rhythm  
 when the food must come in or the fire be put out.<sup>5</sup>

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Marian Wright Edelman is an activist for the rights of children and founder of the Children's Defense Fund. Several years ago, she spoke at All Souls, one of our churches in Manhattan, and told the story of a teacher named Jean Thompson and her fifth grade student, Teddy Staller. I've told this story before; thanks to my colleague, Galen Guengerich, for this retelling.

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*Commonwealth*. This term was the preferred usage of some political writers. There also may have been some anti-monarchical sentiment in using the word.... John Adams utilized this term when framing the Massachusetts Constitution.” For more information, please see [mass.gov/anf/research-and-tech/legal-and-legislative-resources/why-is-massachusetts-a-commonwealth.html](http://mass.gov/anf/research-and-tech/legal-and-legislative-resources/why-is-massachusetts-a-commonwealth.html)

<sup>5</sup> Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use” (fragment), *Circles on the Water*

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Teddy Staller was a mess. He was dirty, and he smelled bad. He had no friends, and seemed totally checked-out of school. Jean Thompson couldn't find much redeeming about him. Despairing, she pulled his file:

First grade: "Teddy is a good boy. He shows promise in his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation."

Second grade: "Teddy is falling behind in his work. He's too serious. His mother is [very sick]."

Third grade: "Teddy's mother died this year. His father shows no interest. Teddy needs help."

Fourth grade: "Teddy is totally withdrawn, and in need of psychological help."

At Christmas time, all the children brought their teacher nicely wrapped gifts, except for Teddy, who handed Jean a paper bag with an elastic around it. Jean opened each present; when she got to Teddy's, the students began to snicker. Jean fished out an old rhinestone bracelet with some of the pieces missing. Immediately slipping it onto her wrist, she held up her arm, saying, "Isn't this pretty!" Taking her cue, the children quieted down. She then took an almost-empty bottle of perfume from the bag, dabbed on a little bit, and exclaimed, "Doesn't it smell nice!"

At the end of the day, Teddy lingered by her desk after the last child had left the classroom. "Miss Thompson," he said, "that was my mother's bracelet. It looks really pretty on you. [Now] you smell just like her, too." With that, he left, and Jean Thomson put her head in her hands and asked G\*d to forgive her. She vowed to help the children who were falling behind, especially Teddy. She began to tutor him, and, by the end of the year, he had caught up with most of his classmates and even surpassed some.

Several years later, Jean received a letter. "Dear Miss Thompson, I'm graduating from high school. Wanted you to be the first to know. Love, Teddy." Four years later, another letter: "Dear Miss Thompson, Wanted you to be the first to know that university hasn't been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Staller." And four years after that: "Dear Miss Thompson, As of today, I am Theodore J. Staller, M.D. How about that? Wanted you to be the first to know. Also, I am getting married in July, and I hope you will come and sit where my mother would have sat, because you're the only family I have. Dad died last year." And Jean Thompson did go, and sat

where his mother would have sat, and wept just as his mother would have wept, and then some.<sup>6</sup>

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Rev. Frederick Buechner defines vocation, or calling, as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” We are, each of us, called to that intersection of gladness and need; called to usefulness.

Beloved spiritual companions,  
Grateful for the wherewithal and the resources,  
may we seek and find,  
bless and be blessed,  
by making ourselves useful.  
May our tears be of joy and thanksgiving.  
May our deep gladness meet the world’s deep need.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Rev. Galen Guengreric, who preached versions of this story on April 1, 2012 (*World Without End*) and May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (*What I Learned From My Mother*).