

Paying God's Love Forward: A Hospital Chaplain's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

It's amazing how moments of clarity and inspiration often come to us in unexpected places—like in the shower, when we're relaxed, and our minds are open. As curious as it may seem, this is often how God reveals God's insights. God communicates and unveils God's truth and presence whenever, wherever, and however God chooses. Recently, as the hot water of a shower rushed over me, I was suddenly struck with inspiration: the connection between paying God's love forward and the concept in the novel *Pay It Forward* became clear.

The story, published by Catherine Ryan Hyde in 1999 and adapted into a film the following year, is based on the idea of doing a good deed for someone else without expecting anything in return—just doing it out of the goodness of your heart. If one person does a good deed for somebody else, it will expand exponentially and soon the world will become a better place!

That's really the essence of spiritual formation. God's love is meant to overflow from our lives into the lives of others. That shower moment was like a heaven-sent nudge to remind me that spiritual formation isn't only about personal transformation but about how we impact those around us through love and service.

As a side note, Hyde explained that the idea for the story came when her car broke down in what she described as a "bad neighborhood" and two total strangers came to her assistance and left before she could thank them.¹

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF PAYING IT FORWARD

Paying it forward aligns closely with biblical principles, particularly the Golden Rule: "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12 NIV). This commandment emphasizes empathy and proactive love. Moreover, the teachings of Jesus urge us to love our neighbors unconditionally, transcending barriers of race, ethnicity, and even differing beliefs.

We are reminded that "the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7 NIV). This profound insight challenges us to view others through the lens of God's love and compassion and recognize the inherent dignity in every person.

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The spiritual calling to acknowledge others as God's children is not limited to grand gestures; it can manifest in the small, everyday interactions that affirm our collective humanity. As a chaplain in a hospital setting, I witness many opportunities, such as greeting staff not usually acknowledged—food service, security, and housekeeping staff.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION: AN ONGOING PROCESS

Spiritual formation is fundamentally about becoming more attuned to our divine identity and purpose. As theologian M. Robert Mulholland Jr. (1936–2015), wrote in *Invitation to a Journey*, spiritual formation is “the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others,” reflecting the transformative journey outlined in 2 Corinthians 3:17–18.² Spiritual formation is not only about “me and God.” Mulholland emphasizes living for the sake of others, or living a life of service and surrender, as the surest path towards spiritual growth.

The Southern Baptist minister Dallas Willard (1935–2013) described spiritual formation as “the restoration of the soul,”³ echoing the comforting words, “He restoreth my soul” (Psalm 23:3 KJV). The metaphor of clay being shaped by a potter serves as a poignant illustration of how God intricately molds us through our experiences, relationships, and challenges. Each of us, unique and cherished, is shaped by the divine hand, called to reflect God's love and goodness in the world.

Spiritual formation is not a solitary endeavor; it is inherently relational. We are called to support one another, to be both mentors and mentees, guiding one another back to wholeness and healing. The process of paying God's love forward becomes an integral part of our spiritual formation, nurturing both our growth and the growth of those around us.

EMBRACING DIVERSITY IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

In a multicultural society, our understanding of spiritual formation must encompass diverse faith traditions and perspectives. While our context may be predominantly Christian, it is crucial to appreciate the richness of other religions—Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more. Each tradition offers valuable insights into the nature of love, compassion, and community.

This inclusive approach aligns with the teachings of the Old Testament, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18 ESV). Recognizing the universality of this command encourages us to engage with people from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, acknowledging their unique experiences and perspectives. We must resist the temptation to confine God to a single ideology as God transcends all human constructs of religion.

THE ROLE OF CHAPLAINS IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

As a hospital chaplain, I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the transformative power of spiritual formation in diverse settings. My journey has taught me that the essence of chaplaincy is about paying God's love forward by offering a calm, listening presence and creating a safe, nonjudgmental space. My sincere conclusion is that every interaction is a sacred opportunity to learn, reflect, and grow in God's love.

The hospital chaplain encounters people from all walks of life, each grappling with their own struggles and uncertainties. The hospital environment serves as a microcosm of society, exposing the spiritual and emotional wounds that often go unnoticed. Just as a gardener nurtures a seed, a chaplain seeks to cultivate growth and healing in the souls of others.

Much of my understanding of spiritual formation is rooted in my own spiritual journey. For nearly fifty years, I have been a member of the Unification Church (now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), founded in 1954 by Rev. Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012). Year after year, I did my best to support various programs, initiatives, and campaigns. One late evening during prayer, after decades of membership, I experienced a profound realization. It wasn't a booming voice or a burning bush but rather a quiet, prayerful awareness that took root in my heart—something I could never have imagined.

I felt God say something like, "Bill, thank you for your years of dedication and faithfulness. I appreciate your devotion and the life of faith you've lived, but don't be confused. I am not a church. I am not a building. Organizational and administrative structures are necessary, but don't get caught up in the externals. I'm not a CEO you need to impress. I am a living, breathing being. You are part of my body. We are a family. I am your parent, and I love you unconditionally."

In my heart, I felt God was telling me it was time for change—that I needed to step out of my bubble, my comfort zone. For thirty years, my friends, acquaintances, and activities were all centered around my church. My fellow members and I shared the same language, terminology, and experiences. It was safe, secure, and comfortable. I could travel anywhere in America, or even the world, and within seconds find common ground with other members: "Oh, you know so-and-so? I know so-and-so. Which Blessing were you in? Me too." In my heart, I said, "God, I know you have my back, and I trust you're doing what's best for me. What is your plan for me?" God responded, "No worries. I have something special in mind for you."

Very shortly afterward, a chain of events unfolded, and I saw God's will manifest. First, I felt called to return to the seminary. I had completed my master's degree in religious studies thirty years earlier at the Unification Theological Seminary (founded in 1975 and renamed HJ International in 2023). I never imagined I would go back, but God was saying, "I want you to get a Doctor of Ministry degree. It's

important. You need credentials in this world. You'll benefit from it, and people will respect you more. They will respect our movement more. Second, I want you to become a hospital chaplain."

I felt like the John Denver character in the movie *Oh, God!* who doesn't feel qualified when God calls him to spread God's message. I said, "God, okay, if that's Your will for me, then I'm ready to become a chaplain."

The journey to becoming a chaplain requires specialized training and formal education over several years. Words cannot fully express my gratitude and appreciation for the CPE supervisors, my many cohorts, and the selfless hospital staff. In sum, it has been and continues to be an eye-opening and nourishing experience for my spiritual growth and development.

When a chaplain steps into a patient's room, ego and personal baggage must be left at the door. A personal agenda to witness or proselytize is not permitted. The chaplain enters the patient's room as God's representative and works with people of all faiths or no faith—Christians, Muslims, Wiccans, pagans, humanists, atheists, and agnostics. The mission is to enter another's space and show love and mercy, in other words, to pay it forward to everyone and anyone. The chaplain cannot discriminate or be selective based on whether a person is Christian or not.

Sometimes, I believe my presence and our conversations helped a patient cope better with their situation; other times, I feel these may have made things worse. I recall one experience when I asked an elderly patient if she was ready to go home. A dark shadow crossed her face as she thought I meant she was going to die and go to heaven. It was an important lesson in choosing my words more carefully.

What do you say or do when a patient is about to have their leg amputated due to diabetes, or when someone is undergoing cancer treatment and is losing their hair from chemo, or when you're consoling a parent who has lost a child or a man whose house has burned down? I remember one case vividly. A patient had escaped a house fire without a scratch, only to realize his dog was still inside. He went back in and was terribly burned over 80% of his body. He was bandaged from head to toe. Treatment for burns is excruciating. It's called debridement—removing dead skin bit by bit to allow new skin to grow. The patient could talk, and I visited him daily. I asked, "How are you dealing with this? What gives you strength?" He didn't mention faith or God; instead, he said he loved mathematics and spent his time doing math puzzles in his head, hour after hour.

As the chaplain, I'm invited to join the doctors on their morning rounds. I shared this conversation with the doctor and suggested providing him with an iPad. There are iPads designed for people with special needs. The doctor loved the idea and said, "Make it happen." The patient later told me he was very grateful because it helped him keep his sanity. Let me tell you something about being in a hospital: it can be boring and often lonely!

THE COLLECTIVE JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS

Spiritual formation is a collective journey, not merely an individual pursuit. In a world marked by division and conflict, our mission is to extend God's love to others and foster connections that transcend barriers. Each interaction, whether brief or sustained, is a heaven-sent opportunity to embody compassion and kindness.

The hospital serves as a microcosm of the community. Chaplains, clergy, spiritual leaders, counselors, and teachers are all involved. People of faith engage with the community and navigate the ups and downs of life. We minister to the whole person, addressing any area of life that affects their ability to experience the life God intends for them. This includes physical, social, and emotional needs; worries about children; financial problems; health issues; troubled relationships; the deaths of loved ones; concerns about spiritual needs; and questions about the meaning and purpose of life, love, being loved, not being loved, peace and gratitude, belonging, and hope—the whole person.

While chaplains help individuals in the hospital, there is a larger picture to consider. Sick people are not only found in hospitals; they are also present in our communities. In fact, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) declared that our communities are sick: “The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around.”⁴

These remarkable words, spoken by this man of God, were part of his final speech given the day before his assassination. His point is that we live in a society that is spiritually unwell. It is this very societal brokenness that calls us to be agents of healing and transformation, both in our personal lives and in our communities.

CONCLUSION: PAYING IT FORWARD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

People want their lives to have meaning and value. During my time as a chaplain intern at a research hospital, I met many patients participating in a clinical study for various illnesses. Across the board, patients expressed sentiments like, “I hope the treatment works, but if it doesn't, I hope the research will help somebody else.” Many patients shared this perspective. It did not matter if the patient was a CEO or a mail carrier; everyone wanted to feel that their life has meaning, and if the trial research didn't help them, they wanted to know there was a chance it might help someone else. Spiritual formation is a lifelong journey that invites us to pay God's love forward by extending grace and compassion to others. It challenges us to recognize the inherent worth in every person and reminds us that we are all children of God, deserving of respect and kindness.

In *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, a poignant lesson emerges as a caregiver imparts wisdom to a neglected child: “You is kind, you is smart, you is important.”⁵ This simple yet profound affirmation encapsulates the essence of spiritual formation. We are called to acknowledge the innate value of every individual at every opportunity

and to foster an environment of love and compassion.

Ultimately, spiritual formation is about embracing our shared humanity and recognizing that we are all on this journey together. By paying God's love forward, we not only enrich our own spiritual lives but also contribute to a more compassionate and loving world. Through our actions and interactions, we have the power to create a ripple effect of kindness and to transform lives and communities along the way. As we reflect on our own journeys of spiritual formation, may we commit to paying God's love forward, nurturing the divine spark within ourselves and others toward wholeness, healing, and harmony.

NOTES

¹ "Ask the Author: Catherine Ryan Hyde," November 14, 2012, I Love NotesofLife.co.uk, <http://notesoflife.co.uk/2012/11/ask-the-author-catherine-ryan-hyde>.

² M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12. Mulholland was emeritus professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

³ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation and the Restoration of the Soul," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 101–9, <https://dwillard.org/resources/articles/spiritual-disciplines-spiritual-formation-and-the-restoration-of-the-soul>.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," speech given April 3, 1968, in Memphis Tennessee, American Rhetoric, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

⁵ Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 443.