

# Pay It Forward Workshops

## A New and Old Philosophy and Practice for Enneagram Teachers

“You don’t pay love back, you pay it forward.”

--Lily Hardy Hammond



Most books and articles about the Enneagram have to do with theory, applications, and history. Few are about how teachers design and conduct presentations and workshops, and thus disseminate the received and developed tradition. This article intends to do something different, and therefore may be a bit controversial. It will discuss whether we might better serve ourselves and our students by offering at least some of our events free of charge, “Pay It Forward” style.

Let me say at the outset that I have no trouble with people, myself included, charging for workshops. In fact, I have been doing just that for more than twenty years. In other words, I am not arguing a moral position or being polemical. Rather, I would like to suggest an alternative way, for those who are interested in creating and holding classes and workshops, one that may work better in these stressful times. And I would like to begin by sharing my own recent pedagogical experiments, and how gratifying they have been to me and my students.

My own involvement with the Pay It Forward movement began after the economic recession hit with full force in September 2008. Many of my friends and students began having serious financial problems, so I designed a one-day workshop to be given in Ashland, Oregon in January 2009 entitled “Coping with Stress in Difficult Times: Using the Enneagram to Access Inner and Outer Resources.” I advertised extensively and kept the cost deliberately low—only \$55.00-75.00 per person, sliding scale. To my great surprise, for the first time in a thirteen year teaching career not a single person pre-registered for the event and I cancelled it several days before it was due to be held. In April of 2009 I ran the exact same workshop and had only three people in attendance (it was shortened to half a day and I waived the fees). Needless to say, given how much work had gone into preparations and advertising, I was highly disappointed in the turnout. I decided then and there to step away from the teaching scene for a while in order to reevaluate my relationship to the profession—and to money.

As it happened, during the next few months of my self-imposed sabbatical a local physician and friend by the name of Dr. Jim Parker got tired of waiting for healthcare reform and decided to initiate a free medical clinic every other Sunday in the area in and around Mount Shasta, CA. He charged nothing for these office visits, but asks that patients try their best to “Pay It Forward.” Here are some excerpts from his website, [www.vhctoday.org](http://www.vhctoday.org):

“VHC (Volunteers for Health Care) Today welcomes you and invites you to join us. We are health care providers and patients who work together, beginning a chain reaction of simple, generous acts of kindness in our communities... In these economically difficult times, we appeal to health care providers to join us in providing a few hours of free health care for those in your community who cannot afford health insurance. And, we appeal to patients receiving free care to volunteer their skills, knowledge, and energy in your community – to **Pay It Forward** to others in need rather than paying it “back,” in “cash” to those not as needy. We are enriching lives by promoting the currency inherent in all people (be it goodness, skills, knowledge, energy)... and making it a usable, valuable asset once again without having to figure out how to convert it to cash first.”

This program has been well appreciated and quite successful in our community, and it inspired me to do additional research online (see especially the websites [payitforwardfoundation.org](http://payitforwardfoundation.org) and [payitforwardmovement.org](http://payitforwardmovement.org)). To continue, the following edited passages were taken from Wikipedia:

- The expression “pay it forward” is used these days to describe the concept of asking that a good turn be repaid by having it done to others instead. Debts and payments can be monetary or by good deeds.

- This concept is not new. It was described by Benjamin Franklin in a letter to Benjamin Webb dated April 22nd, 1784: “I do not pretend to give such a sum; I only lend it to you. When you... meet with another honest Man in similar Distress, you must pay me by lending this Sum to him; enjoining him to discharge the Debt by a like operation, when he shall be able, and shall meet with another opportunity. I hope it may thus go thro’ many hands, before it meets with a Knave that will stop its progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a deal of good with a little money.”
- Later, Emerson wrote in his essay “Compensation”: “In the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom. But the benefit we receive must be rendered again, line for line, deed for deed, cent for cent, to somebody.”
- In 1944, a spokesperson for Alcoholics Anonymous said in the *Christian Science Monitor*: “You can’t pay anyone back for what has happened to you, so you try to find someone you can pay forward.”
- In 1951, the term was popularized by Robert A. Heinlein in his book *Between Planets*. Moreover, he preached and practiced this principle in his own life, as does the Heinlein Society, a humanitarian organization later founded in his name.
- In 2000, Catherine Ryan Hyde’s novel *Pay It Forward* was published, and was later adapted into a Warner Brothers film with the same title.
- This led to the creation of the Pay It Forward Foundation, which focuses on bringing the idea to school age children, parents and educators.

Having trained as an educator, I decided to again try running the “Coping with Stress in Difficult Times” workshop, in January 2010 Mount Shasta, this time “Pay It Forward” style. To my great joy forty-nine people pre-registered (which is pretty good for a city of only about 4,000 souls—over 1% of the population!), and it became the largest single Enneagram event I had ever organized. All nine Enneatypes were in the room, and I was able to lead several powerful type panels in the afternoon. More importantly, people were tremendously excited by, and grateful for, the concept and experience. Amazingly, most arrived already filled with ideas about how they were going to fulfill this (voluntary) obligation. After a welcome, introductions, and a brief overview of the day, I began the workshop with a short teaching piece on the history, philosophy and practice of the Pay It Forward movement. Then I offered participants the following three guidelines:

1) Please try to “Pay It Forward” within 90 days. If this is not possible, then try to do so within a year from the date of this workshop. Otherwise you might forget, lose courage, get lazy, or have second thoughts.

2) You may give money or services to one or more persons or organizations, but in general it is better not to do this with a family member or close friend, because this may problematize personal relationships down the road. This Paying Forward can be anonymous, but doesn’t need to be. For those who are interested, the approximate value of this workshop is somewhere between \$75.00 and \$225.00 per person (depending on where I teach it and who my audience is). You do not need to inform me how and when you “Paid It Forward.”

3) At the lunch break please take a piece of paper and write down at least one or two ideas for your own “Pay It Forward” transactions. These will be for your own private use.

The response was tremendous. Without prompting, people emailed me for weeks afterwards, letting me know the details and timing of their giving. I was so inspired that I decided to immediately plan two more Enneagram workshops, this time back in Ashland and near Sebastopol, CA.

One benefit of holding free public events is that the venues are usually available for free, or at very low cost. I was shocked to find out that the large, beautiful meeting room at the Ashland Public Library would be available at absolutely no charge, since I was performing a “community service.” I advertised by email list, flyers, and through several free websites, and almost sixty pre-registered. The day was a huge success, and I added many names and addresses to my email list for future events and monthly study groups. Once again, people were enormously grateful, with several stating that they probably would not have come if they had been forced to pay a substantial fee. “How nice to finally attend a spiritual workshop without money being involved!” someone remarked at the lunch break.

The workshop near Sebastopol was held in an old redwood meeting hall in Camp Meeker. About 40 students of Native American spirituality (Lakota Sioux) were there, all of whom were students of friends of mine, a husband and wife team who had invited me to present to their well-established group. Once again, the Pay It Forward philosophy was greeted with open arms. Incredibly, a participant came up and said that she had already “Pre-paid It Forward” (!) by being of service the week before to two people in need. Wow!

My hosts and I discussed the idea that “Pay It Forward” practice could roughly be assimilated to the Native American idea of a “potlatch,” which was something I was familiar with from my own graduate degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology. This got me curious—could the two be meaningfully related? After I returned home I did a Google Search, and discovered the following information (*italics are mine*):

“[The potlatch] is an important Coastal Indian ceremony in which the host gives away gifts to those guests who are in attendance. *It is an important social function in which the greater the value of the gifts given away, the greater the assumed wealth of the host.*”

“[It is] a festival ceremony practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. This includes Haida, Nuxalk, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Nuu-chah-nulth, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Coast Salish cultures. The word comes from the Chinook jargon, meaning ‘to give away’ or ‘a gift.’ It is a vital part of indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest... ”

“Different events take place during a potlatch, like singing and dancing, sometimes with masks or regalia, such as Chilkat blankets, the barter of wealth through gifts, such as dried foods, sugar, flour, or other material things, and sometimes money. For many potlatches, spiritual ceremonies take place for different occasions. This is either through material wealth such as foods and goods *or non-material things such as songs and dances.*”

“Typically the potlatching is practiced more in the winter seasons as historically the warmer months were for procuring wealth for the family, clan, or village, then coming home and sharing that with neighbors and friends... *The status of any given family is raised not by who has the most resources, but by who distributes the most resources...* ”

“It is important to note the differences and uniqueness among the different cultural groups and nations along the coast. Each nation, tribe, and sometimes clan has its own way of practicing the potlatch so as to present a very diverse presentation and meaning... ”

One of the things that I myself have noticed in offering the Enneagram “potlatch” style is that I indeed feel wealthier, spiritually speaking, and more psychologically open and generous. I am constantly reminded to be grateful for the riches I have received from my teachers and our beloved, sacred diagram. However, it is important to disclose that I still charge money for individual and couple typing interviews, spiritual counseling sessions, and for monthly Enneagram Inquiry and study groups I hold in my home. To be absolutely clear, I am not suggesting that professionals who depend on their teaching income to earn a living should offer all their knowledge and wisdom

“Pay It Forward” style (here I am thinking of well-known authors and educators such as Hudson, Palmer, , Almaas, Maitri and others to numerous to name). But let’s be honest, the vast majority of Enneagram teachers around the world are, I am guessing, professional amateurs, or amateur professionals, who teach part-time and are merely supplementing, at best, their main source of income.

In addition, given the relatively high cost of advanced courses, most graduates of professional training programs are middle or upper middle class people of some means, and they/we are often better off financially than many of our students. Given this state of affairs, I have three hard questions to pose to the Enneagram community:

- 1) How much do we actually need the money we might generate by charging for our services? Might we not attract more students (and feel better about ourselves), if every once in a while we try teaching “Pay It Forward” style?
- 2) Do we believe that students really won’t value the beloved diagram and system, as well as their own psychological and spiritual growth, if they don’t have to immediately pay sums of money for the teachings and growth experiences? If so, where does that belief come from, and what proof do we have of its validity and usefulness? Are there different ways to engage in healthy (ethically, financially, psychologically) “energy exchange?”
- 3) Is the Enneagram primarily a psychological or *spiritual* system of awareness and transformation? If the answer is the latter, are we truly justified at the end of the day in requiring mandatory fees (often called such things as “donations” and “love offerings”) for helping others to access and integrate their own True Nature? Did Jesus, Buddha, Krishna Lao Tzu do it this way? Or closer to our time in history, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma, various Tibetan lamas, the Pope, etc. At worst there are suggested donations to pay for the maintenance of teachers and facilities (*dana* in Buddhism), but that is quite different from heavily advertised classes and workshops designed to supplement personal income with significant fees on a regular basis. No moral judgments here, just observations. Something to ponder...

To conclude, many Enneagram teachers are finding creative ways in daily life to practice this form of generosity and service. The possibilities are endless, and I encourage my teachers, colleagues, students, clients and friends to engage to try such “experiments of the Heart.”

