

“Meeting Ground”

I'd like to take time this morning, preceding the Annual Meeting of this Society, to reflect upon the meaning of “Community.” I begin with an invitation to you to think about your own experience. Without putting too narrow a definition on the word, I invite you to think back on a time when you felt yourself to be part of a community.

For some folks, this may be easy. And for others, perhaps more difficult. Just recall, if you will, an experience when you felt you belonged, that were at home in that place, and with the living beings surrounding you.

I would ask you to notice the feeling you have when you recall this time of “belonging” in a community. The community could be your family, it could be the folks gathered for a service here in this sanctuary; it could be people singing together. It could be all the living beings gathered in the environs of a creek flowing through the woods on a summer morning or winter afternoon.

Honor that feeling of being in a community for a moment, if you will.

And now I'd like to ask you to think about a time when you felt like you did NOT belong in a given community. This may even be easier for some of us than recalling a time of belonging. We Unitarian Universalists are independent souls. We stand apart from the herd and are sometimes even proud of it.

But think of a time when you might have wanted to belong and you found yourself apart from a group of people or feeling like you didn't belong in a place. Or perhaps you chose to stay apart from that community, knowing it was somehow not your community, not your place or group of kindred souls.

Just notice and honor that feeling of being apart.

Each of these orientations - belonging to groups we find enriching, and being on our own - is part of living. In the reading by Martin Buber, he described each individual as related to a single source, and at the same time related to every other being. Both direct connection to the source of life AND connection to all other manifestations of life is the dynamic of community he describes. Life animates us as individuals, and flows between us in community.

“Community” is a word that gets used allot in our times. There are so many different ways to think of community, and the central animating source which unites individuals in communities. I'd like to briefly consider three perspectives on “community” and that source with you today:

Universal community
Earth community
and Religious community

First - Universal community. Thomas Berry, Catholic monk and ecological theologian, writes

“The universe is the primary sacred community....Our recent knowledge of the universe comes primarily through the empirical, observational sciences rather than from intuitive processes. We are listening to the earth tell its story through the signals that it sends to us in outer space, through the light that comes to us from the stars, through the geological formations

of the earth and through a vast number of other evidences of itself that the universe manifests to us....The universe itself is now experienced as an irreversible time-developmental process, not simply as an abiding season-renewing universe. Not so much cosmos as cosmogenesis....”

In other words, contemporary science has confirmed for us that the universe is unfolding, evolving, always in further creation. Berry says

“The original flaring forth of the universe carried the present within its fantastic energies,” just as the present is an expression of those energies. “The universe,” he writes, “is the larger self of each person since the entire sequence of events that has transpired since the beginning of the universe has been required to establish each of us in the precise structure of our own being and in the larger community context in which we function.”

This is something like scientific verification of the 1920’s manifesto made famous in the 70’s by none other than Leonard Nimoy with his recording of “Desiderata” - “You are a child of the universe,

you have a right to be here.” Schmalzty, but, in Berry’s view, true.

The universe has evolved to produce...you and me. We are in living reciprocal relationship to the evolutionary life force. We are part of that evolution, we are expressions of it and we help shape it. We are connected to every other manifestation of life, in a pattern of evolution and continuing creation. Berry comments

“In its every aspect the human is a participatory reality. We are members of the great universe community. We participate in its life. We are nourished, instructed and healed by this community. In and through this community we enter into communion with that numinous mystery on which all things depend for their existence and activity....”

[p. 95 A Sourcebook for Earth’s Community of Religions]

Perhaps this is a rather grandiose way to think about “community” - yet it is one answer to a fundamental human question: Do I belong?

Is the Universe friendly, conducive to life, conscious, aware, even - as our Universalist faith affirms - lovingly disposed towards me?

Awareness that life has evolved continuously from the big bang to this moment, and everything we are made of is connected with that universal opening gambit answers - “Not only do you belong, you are part of this community in your very elements.” Whatever this universe is unfolding, whether it is compassion or chaos, we are a part of it. We are part of the universal community.

I think many of us sense this intuitively. Maybe your remembered experience of a feeling of belonging earlier had to do with feeling you belonged to the universe as you looked up at the night sky, or knowing yourself to be part of a larger plan when you saw a fossil embedded in a canyon wall. As Unitarian Universalists especially, I think this awareness is very close to the center of our faith. We believe in evolution. We believe in the big bang, and science. We can be energized by knowing the Universe is unfolding, and we are a part of that.

There is an old Universalist covenant which speaks of “growing into harmony with the Divine.” This may be heard as a statement of faith about the way the universe unfolds and evolves. It says there is a pattern with which we may harmonize. A beloved friend of mine,

Reverend Sam Reinke, often affirmed “All is unfolding according to the pattern of the highest good.”

Whatever is unfolding, as individuals and as a congregation, we are in a living, reciprocal relationship with the source of life expressed in creation.

More specifically, we live in the earth community.

A traditional formulation of the development of the human sense of community would be this one, given by Steven Rockefeller [Sourcebook, p.93]:

“...a developing sense of community...begins with the family and tribe and then gradually extends outward embracing the region, the nation, the race, all members of a world religion, and then all humanity.”

He says further,

“The sense of community involves an awareness of kinship, identity, interdependence, participation in a shared destiny, relationships to a common good. It gives rise to the moral feelings of respect and sympathy, leading to a sense of moral obligation....”

According to this view, we start by thinking of “community” in terms of our family and then think “out” from there to include humanity. As our growing awareness of our connection to all living beings comes into play, we broaden our idea of community beyond homo sapiens to include animals, plants, the soil, the ecosystem, and the earth.

Certainly this is one way we develop our sense of earth community.

Another equally important sense of community is our intuitive awareness that we are part of the earth. Our boundaries don’t have to stretch to include the animals and plants in our community if we keep the knowledge each one of us begins with as a child - we are connected to the sky, and mud puddles, animals can communicate, trees have souls. There are many folks who never know much feeling of “community” in their human families, but they know what it means to be connected to rocks, rivers, woods, and mountains. A sense of kinship with the land, respect for nature, sympathy with nonhumans and awareness of our wider moral obligation can infuse us with a sense of belonging and community all our lives.

However we get there - whether by expanding the human “tribe” to include all living beings, or by affirming the connection to nature we know intuitively in our souls - an awareness of ourselves as earth- community members is central to our common faith. This is a relatively unique perspective among contemporary faith communities.

An important distinguishing characteristic of that “community- building” power at the heart of this congregation and our denomination is our love for the earth, I believe. The question is whether we have the practical wherewithall to put our shoulders to the wheel and put that faith into action in real ways.

The Navajo youths in Canyon de Chelly who pulled the jeep out of the sandy creek never questioned whether they could do it - the jeep’s owner was part of their community, and they were going to pull the vehicle out no matter how impossible it might have seemed. Their example is seminal for us, it seems to me. [See Gary DeCarolis’ A View from the Balcony]

The writer Margaret Wheatley comments: “There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about....The cure for despair is not hope. It’s discovering what we want to do about something we care about.” [Turning To One Another]

Which is to say, when what we care about most deeply is central in our focus, obstacles shift to the sidelines, and the power and ability to act together as a community flows freely. (I suggest we might keep this in mind when we look at the budget in the Annual Meeting!)

Finally, I'd like to consider the idea of "the community of religions" and "religious community" with you briefly here.

Bisho Boutros Mouallem, from the Greek Church, spoke at a congress of religious leaders saying:

"Religions! How many bitter historical memories does this word evoke! Religions have caused some of the most cruel and savage wars in history, leaving on the face of humanity the most hideous scars, to the shame of our race. Alas, that is not only past history, ancient or medieval: almost all the situations of serious tension on our earth in the present day still have a religious coloring.

We must of course recognize that those so-called 'wars of religion,' both today and in the past, have usually had and still have motives which are less religious than political, ethnic, economic, ideological, or of other origin. Nevertheless, strictly religious factors have indeed been operative in some of those painful conflicts.

It is more than time to put an end to all that troubled past. We have an acute and common awareness of the urgency of this need." [Sourcebook p. 162]

Often, I have been in conversation with someone for the first time and they say "What do you do?" and I say "I am a minister" and then I always add "a Unitarian Universalist minister." Some people know Unitarian Universalism, some mistake me for a member of Reverend Moon's Unification church, and several times people have said "Oh, you belong to that Nice denomination - the one that respects what people believe, right?" Maybe you have had a similar exchange with someone.

Although there are certainly tolerant, loving people in every organized religion, ours is a faith tradition which is explicitly organized around the principle of religious tolerance. While other 18th century European immigrants were converting or killing the native peoples who originally inhabited this continent, Universalist doctor George deBenville learned the language of natives in what would become Pennsylvania; he traded herbs and medicines with their elders, and preached that cultures, races, and genders are equally beloved by the Creator. Peace between religions and religious community, in his view, was not created because people had identical perspectives. It arose from a central intention to be loving, and to act in a loving way.

Similarly, a community of world religions would not be a community in which everyone had the same idea or experience of God - or no God, for that matter. It would be a world spiritual community which explicitly shared a central value: the intention to love one another.

Perhaps you had the opportunity to read the text or see the video of President Obama's recent speech at Cairo University. Addressing the Muslim community at the University, he said this:

"It's easier to start wars than to end them. It's easier to blame others than to look inward. It's easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There's one rule that lies at the heart of every religion -- that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends

nations and peoples -- a belief that isn't new; that isn't black or white or brown; that isn't Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It's a faith in other people, and it's what brought me here today.

...All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort -- a sustained effort -- to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.” [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>]

It seems to me those words are applicable to our community as well, as we go about making decisions regarding the life of this Society. “Love your neighbor” - this is the heart-opening center which can keep us focussed through all meetings, vicissitudes, trials and triumphs.

Our community is the cosmos: on the grand cosmic scale, each one of us is a blessed expression of life, and each one of us evolving - each of us IS an answer, but none of us HAS all the answers.

Our community is the living system which is life on earth - and our human task is to muster the faith and determination to respond to the challenges we face, large and small.

It is the religious community, wherein our part is to walk the path of loving our neighbors. Let's not only walk that path - let's make it shine. AMEN