

Communitarianism

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Our service theme this month is relationships. This allowed me to reflect on and study our relationships within the context of Unitarian Universalism. I struggle with how Unitarian Universalism is sometimes sold and described. I've cringed during many coffee hour gatherings when I've heard the conversation happening behind me, beside me, and across the room. Someone says, "You should come to this church because you can believe anything you want here." To my ears it sounds like breaking glass and screeching. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention and my eyes roll. In my mind's eye I see myself running toward the conversation in slow motion, tipping over tables, and knocking coffee cups out of the hands of people in my way and I'm yelling, "Noooooooooooooooooooo." It is simply not true. We Unitarian Universalists cannot believe whatever we want. We agree within a living covenant to walk together. We seek to understand that we will not always agree with one another but commit to disagree in love and work for the common good, not consensus mind you, but the common good.

We may have arrived to this faith led on a Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Pagan, Jewish, Humanist or perhaps another path, but we gather because we are Unitarian Universalist. Our ministries together identify us as not merely observers but forward looking and innovative champions of peace, love, compassion, and justice for humanity and our earth. Our social identity and personality is molded by community relationships. Individualism becomes smaller. We might call ourselves communitarian. Amitai Etzioni, one of the leaders of the American communitarian movement, pointed out that communities can be defined with reasonable precision as having two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, a particular culture. This definition might sound familiar to you. It is who we are.

Early in the 1900's Universalist ministers, women, arrived in this area to answer the call of organizing families. The Rev. Ella Elizabeth Bartlett was the first to arrive followed by the Rev. Harriet Baker Robinson. Why did these universalist women and ministers answer such a call? Why did Rev. Robinson preach here and take the train to Tarpon Springs to preach in the evening? Honestly it was because men wouldn't do it and it was the commitment of these women to the saving message of Universalism. They understood they were not only planting the seeds of Universalism, but knew the only way to create change in an ailing world was through the growth of Universalism. They believed their faith could change their communities, touch people's lives and heal the world. You might know Universalism is rooted in Calvinism. Calvinists believe that only the elect few will be saved. Universalists believe those who will be saved includes everyone thus universal salvation. Unitarian minister and historian, the Rev. Mark Harris, tells us the Universalist perspective emphasizes our common relationship to the whole of creation; to a living God who redeems all. In this vision, we are not distinguishable

from one another; nor are we judged as saved or unsaved. Now for you hardcore liberal Unitarians out there who are squirming and beginning to bristle because I've just used God, redemption, and the notion of salvation in one sentence, unclench your teeth, release your whitened knuckles from the chair in front of you and allow me to explain. Modern Universalism simply asks us not to focus on saving ourselves but to save the whole of creation. That is, we should not only be concerned about making ourselves whole, but to be involved in creating wholeness for one another and making the world whole. That's salvation. Demonizing one another and our world goes against our Universalist roots.

Beginning in the late 20th century, many began to observe a deterioration in the social networks of the United States. In the book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam observed that nearly every form of civic organization had undergone drops in membership exemplified by the fact that, while more people are bowling than in the 1950s, there are fewer bowling leagues. This results in a decline in "social capital", described by Putnam as "the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other."

Communitarianism emphasizes the need to balance individual rights and interests with that of the community as a whole and argues that individual people are shaped by the culture and values of their communities. Communitarianism and our faith have the goal of uniting with others, not personal fulfillment. "Virtue is always conceived of in terms of relationship and not in terms of self," says Harris.

Those opposed to communitarianism ask, "So how can you liberals 'balance' those rights with those of the community?" or "Individuals have rights and responsibilities, but the community has rights as a whole, what is that? The collective?" Communitarianism differs from liberalism in that it affirms that the community as a whole has rights. This view has suffered a great deal of bad press over the last twenty plus years, pretty much ever since Ross Perot and various other politicians espoused it. Attack dogs strove hard to discredit it as a dressed-up form of leftism. We all have our days when we think what happens in our congregation is about us; what we need and what we want. We all have our own issues that prevent us from being totally accepting, communitarian, and loving universally. We may sometimes think individuality trumps community. Because we gather as Unitarian Universalists does not mean we leave our humanity and our experiences that have molded us into the people we are today at the door. We bring all of this with us.

Let me share with you the story of my first Valentine's Day with Richard. I warn you it is not a glamorous story. It was 1991. Richard and I were living in the West Village of New York City and had decided not to make reservations for dinner, but to wing it. We stumbled upon an Italian place where a portly man in a chef's hat stood outside its door inviting passersby to come in and eat. And so, we did. It was a decent meal. Richard leaned toward seafood dishes while I, let's say, made safer choices. An hour later I found myself standing outside the bathroom door of my apartment while Richard lay inside on the bathroom floor intermittently heaving. I warned you this wouldn't be a glamorous story. If you find yourself in New York City and a chef is on the street begging you to come in and dine you should run, and run quickly lest you suffer Richard's fate. There is a reason the chef is begging for patrons. Unsuspecting patrons that will pay in many ways for a rancid meal. I tell you this story not only to warn you of disasters of the culinary kind. The story is more about the choices I made that evening. I could have told Richard, "Well, this has been fun and really stinks for you" and cut my losses. I didn't say that because one, it was my apartment and my bathroom, and two, I recognized it wasn't about me

and was attentive, compassionate, and glad I ordered the chicken. Twenty-six years later we are wiser to chefs on the street and continue to nurture our relationship, allowing each other to grow within the relationship, and recognizing it is not about our individual needs but the needs of relationship. This story leads us to a better understanding of communitarianism and food poisoning.

The real challenge, the message of Universalism and the work of communitarianism, is discarding the notion of meeting one's own needs. Our task is to understand what life asks of us. What do we need to put aside to heal and create wholeness? True community doesn't happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group. If this doesn't happen, then we are merely a group of individuals sharing common space but not becoming a community. It doesn't mean that we go to the extremes of everyone wearing the same clothing, praying the same way, if at all, or believing the same things. However, it does mean that we move individualism from the center of our focus and replace it with a new concept of shared community, in which everyone gives up a little so that we can gain a lot.

In true community, we gain an affirmation of who we are both as individuals and as part of a group. We gain the wisdom of others who may have ideas different from our own. In true community, we are supported in our life's journeys because we feel safe to be known at our deepest levels, and because we are all committed to the health of the community. In a thriving community people want to be treated as members; and they aspire to full membership. Therefore, inclusion is a major principle of not only communitarianism but of justice. The most important ways of being included—of participating in community—flow from some of the basic continuities of life: kinship, friendship, and effort. Religion and justice are distorted if these continuities are weak, or absent, or if they are excessively demanding. The underlying truth is that community brings people together, not as manipulated or mobilized "masses," but in ways that sustain the wholeness and soundness of our lives. Above all, we gain the commitment and the power to change the world. The traditions of our faith, of justice equity and compassion create a saving faith. Our faith is one of universal love, one of community, one of friendship and membership. May we be witness to a living Universalist heritage that allows us to consider the community over the individual.

May it be so.