

“Unitarian Universalist Individualism”

Danielle Webber

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I am not certain why Kathleen McTigue believed it was necessary to inform us that it was a person with Down’s Syndrome bagging her groceries the day after her father died. But I suspect it is to show the reader that someone who is seen as dis-abled, or un-able, to interact fully with the world around them was the only person who was able to fully interact with her in those minutes. The only person who was able to embrace her pain and sorrow in that moment and offer her a blessing. Being able to sit with someone’s pain, someone’s discomfort is not easy. There is often tension, like that of a dam holding back water. The person sharing the icky bits of themselves, or their own emotions about the icky bits, feels vulnerable, feels exposed, and tender. And like the crumbling of an old dam that is about to fall apart, once you have opened up it is nay impossible to stop the flood of emotions and pain.

And the person on the receiving end feels incapable to hold everything that is coming at them. Unaware of how to support, unable to make the pain stop.

It usually isn’t until this tension is palpable that both people start to worry about the fallout, the consequences, of what is happening, and how to manage it. Stop up the dam, murmur hushed words that are meant to stop the flow of tears, meant to hold back the outburst. A calm hand, rubbing a shoulder, or a knee to try to ease the distress. Hiccoughing in an attempt to gain control. But what would happen if we were able to remove the tension in this scene? If the person in pain didn’t have the need to hold-back. And the person receiving didn’t try to stop it up. Could the floodgates, if left open, be allowed to release the pain, and perhaps a kind of equilibrium be reached?

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When I was 19, after a particularly bad bout of what I believed was exhaustion left over from having the flu, my mother and my boyfriend convinced me to go see a doctor. I went to my mother’s GP, not really having seen a doctor since my pediatrician stopped seeing patients at 16, and she came to the appointment with me.

After much conversation, and several possible diagnoses, that were ruled out with various tests, the doctor diagnosed me with Bipolar Depression. I was given a prescription for medication, and a referral form to see a counsellor.

If it wasn't for the fact that my mother had a similar diagnosis, I probably wouldn't have been diagnosed for several more years when my depressive episodes became more significant than just lethargy. I had been attempting to hold my diagnosis back. I didn't know what it was, but I knew I was hiding something behind the mask of that flu. Holding it behind a dam. But because I had someone who knew me, someone who had seen me in my good light, and had witnessed some of my shadow sides, I was able to receive help and learn how to treat my symptoms before they were able to run away from me. I was able to let the dam open, and find equilibrium.



Not all stories of division look as extreme or are as evident as mine, and as Kathleen McTigue. Much like Rev. Lynn shared with us in her sermon last week “We bob along in fragile little bottles ... so contained ... so constricted.” We live in a society where setting oneself apart from the others is considered the norm.

Where being all that one can be, striving to achieve all that one possibly can, climbing the corporate ladder, making it on our own is considered the most desired, really the only suitable outcome. And no longer are we bombarded by “healthier you” advertisements only in January, but it seems as if almost daily there are new products, programs and prescriptions that will allow us to achieve these unattainable goals. But what if this setting apart, this high achievement, this need to be able to do, and to be everything is what causes us to build up the dams that keep us separate? I can certainly see a correlation between the two.



People keep asking me, what is next? I have graduated from Seminary, I have completed my Clinical Pastoral Education, and I am now done my internship. So what's next? Well, the last stage to being welcomed into ministerial fellowship is to have an interview with the ministerial fellowshiping committee.

This is a committee of 9 people, roughly 50/50 ministers and lay leaders within our denomination. I have to send them a packet of information about myself, and then the committee has a month to review and prepare for the interview. I will preach for them, answer questions, and after an hour they will welcome me into Fellowship, or ask me to keep working out a few things and perhaps come back in a year.

As you might imagine, the process is significant and the packet is excruciatingly large.

Not only will they want to see copies of my supervisor, committee and self evaluations and school transcripts; but I also have to write 4 essays and articulate my competency in 16 different areas of ministry. My interview with the Committee is happening the first week of December, and I will be spending the next 3 months preparing for that interview. Just as I have been spending my last 4 years preparing for this interview. The significance placed on this interview is astounding.

And while I would never want to have a minister, or become a minister without being fully prepared, I believe that the implicit need of perfectionism can be stifling, and very likely damaging in some scenarios.



SO how do we move away from this perfectionistic, individualist world, separating ourselves from all others in an effort to stand out from all others? How do we move away from the sense that we need to know how to do everything, so that we can manage everything on our own? How do we safely step out of our comfort zones, and be willing to admit that we can't manage all on our own? Is it possible to recognize our need for other people in order to find balance and wholeness in the world? Perhaps then we could hear an honest answer to the question "How are you?" and we wouldn't be caught unprepared for the multitude of possible answers.



Earlier Margaret shared another piece of writing from Rev. McTigue, that went: "We hustle along with our private preoccupations, brows furrowed in concentration, hurrying lest we waste even a minute. But all of the important 'doings' that fill our days pale against our singular 'being.'"

How often have we found bliss spending an evening with good friends, a deliciously prepared meal, and tasty wine? Or spending the morning in Pj's with a hot beverage and conversation with our favourite person? Or being in community on a Sunday morning, having just sung your favourite hymn?

Why is it that these times are so few and far between? Because we have a need to be doing? Why is it that we wait so long to reach out, and make these connections?

If we affirm that we are a part of the interdependent web of existence, then why do we spend so much time trying to separate ourselves from those around us?



If when we get together, spending precious moments with those who are close to us offers a sense of delight, connection and even tranquility; is it so hard to believe that connecting with someone when we are in pain and suffering would bring anything but solace, and maybe relief? Much like dams, holding back water from the larger lake, perhaps we will find steadiness when we open up. When we stop being concerned about all of the doings and remember that we can just be.

When we stop being concerned about the climbing of a ladder, the setting our selves apart, and making resolutions to become better individuals. Maybe then we will be able to recognize the Holy power of that interdependent web. Not just connecting humans to animals, vegetable and mineral. But connecting us to each other.



In his play, *The Clergy Project*, our Minister Reverend Shawn Newton, partnered with Anglican Priest Daniel Brereton and Rabbi Elyse Goldstein to share stories about ministry, about being a leader of faith in an attempt to break down some of the walls that divide us.

In one of the stories, Father Daniel recounts a conversation with a nun from his seminary who asks “Who are you Daniel?” The young seminary student starts to articulate: “I am Daniel, I was born to my parents, I have been an Anglican for all my life, I am...”

He continues like this for another few sentences, until the nun interrupts and says “Yes Daniel, but *who are you?*” Daniel starts wondering, “I am ... I am...” with a pensive look on his face, and then he says certainly – looking straight at the nun. “I am.” The nun puts her hands together in prayer, and says “May that always be enough.”



I believe that the nun meant, “May *you always know* that is enough.”

We strive for so much in our lifetime. Attempting to meet the expectations of everyone around us, the expectations that we have learned to desire.

If only we could see that our very existence, our simply being, is Holy in and of itself and that we are enough, and perfect and whole without having to separate ourselves from everyone else, without having to set ourselves apart from everyone else.



Our opening hymn this morning was “When our Heart is in a Holy Place,” and there are so many reasons to sing this song. Seeing as how we have sung it three times this summer, I have found at least a few of those reasons.

But I picked it this morning because of the insight that each of the verses offer:

When we trust the wisdom in each of us,
Every colour every creed and kind
And we see our faces in each other’s eyes

Letting us know that we don’t need to hold all of the wisdom.
Aware that together we will all be able to hold that wisdom.
And that we can see our own strength in the eyes of another.
We can see our own pain in the eyes of another.
We can see our own humanity in the eyes of another.
Then our heart is in a Holy place.

When we tell our story from from deep inside,
And we listen with a loving mind,
And we hear our voices in each other’s words,

Letting us know that we don’t have the whole story.
That together we will be able to hold the entirety of humanity’s stories.
And that we can hear our words in another’s voice.
We can hear our story in between the words of another.
And we can hear about our humanity in voice of another.
Then our heart is in a Holy place.

When we share the silence of sacred space,
And the god of our heart stirs within,
And we feel the power of each other’s faith

This verse shares that powerful bliss I talked about earlier.
Feeling the power of each other’s faith, knowing that we are all one part of this bigger, connected, and ever present web.
It only takes a silent moment to notice, and our heart is in that holy place.



What would the world look like if we could live in that holy place?

If we could realize that it is not our individuality, but our interdependent-ness that will allow us to grow, and flourish into the best we can be. What would it look like if we could forgive ourselves and each other, and live into our unity?

I leave this question open, unanswered, because I have still not been able to find the answer. And I need all of us, we all need all of us to make it. So let us work toward it together. Let us begin now, in love.