

“Weaving Connections”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
21 August 2022

Reading

“Connections are made slowly” - Marge Piercy
(This poem is readily available online.)

Sermon

Though it's been a few years since I last saw it,
I've never forgotten the tree at the Ontario Science Centre,
the one indoors, suspended from the ceiling
with its entire root structure stretching to the far corners of the room.

Across the years, whenever I have heard talk of the interdependent web,
I've been transported back to the museum, to that room, and to that tree,
with its upside-down underpinnings on display for all to see.

It reminds me of Marge Piercy's poem we heard a moment ago:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

She goes on to say that we must:

Weave real connections. . . .
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in.

Such is the work ever before us as Unitarian Universalists.
It's what life in our congregation is all about.

Yet, sometimes, we UUs seem more inclined to lean on our first principle
(about an individual's inherent worth and dignity),
to the detriment of our seventh
(that reminds us of the interconnected web to which we owe our lives).

Too often, it seems, we think ourselves free agents, as solo acts,
living under the illusion of our separateness,
when the reality is that our lives and our destinies are bound up with one another,
and with all of life, in this sometimes-complicated web of being.

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In her book *Grace (Eventually)*,
Anne Lamott tells a story about skiing.¹

She explains that she thought her teenage son, Sam,
was embarrassed to ski with her
because once, while standing next to him and his friend,
at the bottom of a hill, she fell over for no apparent reason.

And the first time they skied together,
she skied in a strangely slow, inexorable path for about 30 metres
right into the net at the bottom of the slope,
the net put there to protect the small children of the ski school.

Then, adding insult to injury,
she got tangled up in the net, like a fish, she said.

After that, she and Sam skied separately.
But that's not the story.

The story is about the time on the chair lift,
when she couldn't remember whether the stop she was approaching
was the one she actually wanted.

She hesitated just long enough for the chair lift
to jerk forward and continue its relentless ascent.

Only then did she realize that it had, indeed, been the right stop, after all.

But, by then, the chair lift and the ground were growing ever farther apart.

Even so, in a mild panic, she wriggled to the edge of the seat
and jumped, flinging herself, as she described it,
the way stuntmen fling themselves onto the backs of speeding trains.

"I was in the air for an eternity before I landed hard," she said,
"proving the theory of gravity once and for all
and I was still somehow upright on my skis, for a moment, until I fell over."

"I do not imagine anyone had seen anything [quite] like this before,

¹ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually)*, 15-16.

someone hurtling into outer space with such force,
and from such a low starting point.”

“I was aware that people were pretending not to have noticed,
[either] out of kindness or mortification.
But I am ever my mother’s daughter,
and so my first impulse was to wave with confidence,
to the few who were watching,
[to] wave like a politician campaigning from a rarely used horizontal position.”

The story ends with Lamott being grateful for not having broken anything,
grateful to the ski patrol that picked her up and took her to a warming hut,
but grateful mostly that her son Sam was not there to have witnessed any of it.

There is little else like the fear of embarrassment or shame
to fuel our desire to be alone, to cause us to withdraw, to pull away.
To keep us from reaching out.

Yet, hiding our vulnerabilities doesn’t get us very far,
or help to build strong communities.

If anything, and paradoxically, it is in sharing our vulnerabilities
that we are more often to find recognition, understanding,
affirmation, and connection.

Rather than beating a retreat, if we can withstand the discomfort,
we can learn that community springs from sharing ourselves,
in the weak places, as well as the strong.

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Across the years, Bob and I visited many of the forests
of mighty redwoods and sequoias and Douglas firs
that stretch between Northern California
and the lower mainland of British Columbia.

Each time it has been, for me, a sacred experience,
to be in the presence of trees that have stood for more than a thousand years.

Trees, these days, that are increasingly at risk
because of drought and fire damage made all the worse by climate change.

What I was most surprised to learn on an early visit, though,
was that these enormous trees, many of which rise more than 100 metres,

have root structures that extend only two or three meters down into the soil.

These ancient forests have so far stood the tests of time—
and the storms and droughts through the centuries—
because they have stood together.

These trees have survived because their roots are intermingled.
With their root systems entangled with one another,
their destinies are truly intertwined.

So it is with a community, and with a congregation.

As Piercy put it: “you can’t always tell what’s happening,
or that half a tree is spread out in the soil under our feet.”

But the truth is, of course, that our lives are interconnected
in more ways than we may care to concede.

At the heart of being human is the truth
that we live in covenant with all of life on this planet.

And this is especially true in a congregation—
where we form an intentional community of memory and hope,
and where we are called to:

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses. . . .
[To] keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in...

This effort is at once completely natural, and harder than it might seem.

And so it would be foolish to not admit to the many rocks that lie in the soil,
or the stumbling stones that on occasion emerge at the surface—
the ones that can impede our reaching out or cut off connection.

The sometimes small and sometimes not-so-small differences
that demand that we get over, get around, or get through them,
if we are to overcome whatever separates us.

In the face of such challenges, giving up on community
is sometimes the more tempting course.

In her reflection called “Messy and Imperfect Beloved Community,”
UU lay leader Laila Ibrahim describes the ups and downs

of her experience in UU community across the years.²

I have been going to the same church for a very long time.
For nearly thirty years most Sundays
I have walked through our beautiful redwood doors.
In all those years I have filled a variety of leadership positions,
from [teaching the “Our Whole Lives” Sexuality curriculum]
to [being] Board President, usher coordinator to stewardship co-chair.
And in all those years my congregation
has had ample opportunity to disappoint me.

I am disappointed when people don’t think
my justice project is the one we should collectively work on;
I am disappointed when people want different music than I do;
I am disappointed that we don’t all agree that our Children’s Ministry
is the most important priority in the church;
I am disappointed that people don’t give enough
time, talent, or treasure to the church as I do.
I am disappointed...well, you get the idea....

Two or three times over the years,
I have been so disappointed that I
seriously questioned remaining in my congregation.
On those occasions, I have thought, [forget] it.
I can just stop going to church for a while or...forever.
But staying away has never helped me through such times.
Rather, coming in closer,
telling people about my spiritual crisis—
listening, sharing, caring, and worshipping have helped me....

Because we are not in church to be with people
who want to sing the same music,
or rally for the same cause,
or attend the same retreats.

We are in church to learn to love better....

We disagree, we annoy, we flake out on one another.
And we worship, we support, we hold, and we affirm one another....

There is really only one choice [she says]:
between imperfect community and no community.

² *Bless the Imperfect: Meditations for Congregational Leaders*, Kay Montgomery, editor, 18-19.

For centuries now, we and those who came before us
have chosen imperfect community over the alternative.

While we often focus on the great figures in our storied past,
this “living tradition” has always been sustained by the people in the pews,
the ones making the decision week in and week out, year after year,
to reach out, even after hurts or disappointment,
to deepen their relationships and strengthen their communities
by tending to the sacred ties that bind.

That’s what makes this congregation and so many others
“little loving laboratories of the human spirit”—
places where we take up the spiritual practice of being in community—
which so often involves being pushed and pulled and prodded
into unexpected adventures of personal and spiritual growth.

As I’ve often said before, we are each other’s spiritual practice.

If you have no idea what I’m talking about,
I’m guessing you have yet to serve on a committee,
or volunteer in some other meaningful way around First.
Yet to work in relationship with someone or several people
who see things or say things or do things differently than you would.

The spiritual test arises in such moments,
when we have to decide what to do with our frustrations and disappointments,
when we have to navigate our differences.

And when we have to do so while knowing
that our covenants have come to mean something—
and that they hold us to the degree that we uphold them.

Over the past few years, it’s become increasingly clear
that our wider culture is in short supply of the tools
we most need to manage the challenges confronting our age—
tools such as tolerance, patience, curiosity,
understanding, grace, and forgiveness.

I hope your involvement in this community
helps you to develop and deploy these tools in your own life on a regular basis.

I see this as a significant reason why places such as this are needed:
to help us cultivate care and compassion,
that we might better contend with the challenges we face

in ways that lead on to human flourishing.

There is something counter-cultural about all of this.

Our religious tradition has a five-hundred-year history of resistance against the narrow creeds from which we emerged.

We are proud of this history, and rightly so.

We celebrate the struggle for freedom of thought and expression that was won by the sacrifices of those who went before us.

When I've taught *Coming of Age* in the past, I've tried to convey to our youth that the great gift of religious liberty they may so easily take for granted has come at a precious price.

But I'm not sure they fully appreciate—or if any of us ever can—the fact we enjoy the shade of trees that we did not plant. And that we drink water from wells we did not dig.

This seems to be an awareness that comes easiest with age, often after having planted a few seeds or dug some wells ourselves.

But as we become ever more aware of the costs paid by those who've gone before, do our hearts not turn to gratitude?

And does not our gratitude call us to respond in kind, to do our part in our time?

To dedicate ourselves to this proverbial forest of which we are a part—that it might serve and sustain generations still to come?

In asking these questions—about commitment, and connection, and community—it's worth reminding ourselves what makes this place unique, and why we would devote ourselves to its well-being.

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The theological diversity by which we are known is both our greatest strength and often our greatest challenge.

The expansive range of beliefs among us can lead to the view that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything we want.

This, of course, isn't true.

Ours is a faith formed in dialogue and in relationship.

Though we proudly steer clear of creedal tests, the truth is that claims to conscience made by an individual are usually held in tension with the witness and affirmation of the wider community.

We are called into accountability to our principles and each other.

At times, this can lead one group or another to feel ostracized or on the outside looking in.

A few years ago, in a denominational report on theological diversity, it was noted that among UUs, the Christians feel marginalized, as do the Humanists, the Neo-Pagans, and everyone else in-between.

This experience was the case for every theological sub-group, except, no surprise, for the Buddhists, who have apparently mastered a healthy non-attachment to feeling themselves at the centre of things.

Our ongoing challenge is finding our way towards unity without uniformity, to learn how to cherish our individuality without retreating into individualism. To find ways to co-exist in harmony and common cause, without needing to agree about all things.

These are not uniquely Unitarian Universalist concerns. They are, of course, also the concerns of all democratic societies in the modern era.

But, unlike many other faiths and political states, these are the concerns at the core of our spiritual identity.

And so we must learn to cherish the forest, as much as the individual trees that give it shape.

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UU minister Forrest Church—and yes, that was his name—spoke of the world as a vast cathedral.³

³ Forrester Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*, Introduction/Invocation.

In his writing, he asked us to:

Contemplate the windows.

In the Cathedral of the World[,]” he said, “[
there are windows beyond number,
some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust,
others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines.

Each in its own way is beautiful.

Some are abstract, others representational,
some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling.

Each tells a story about the creation of the world,
the meaning of history, the purpose of life,
the nature of humankind, the mystery of death.

The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

The same light shines through all our windows,
but each window is different.

The windows modify the light,
refracting it in various patterns that suggest discrete meanings.

Even as one cannot believe usefully in “everything,”
to find meaningful expression Unitarian Universalism
must be modified or refracted through the glass
of individual and group experience.

He concedes, that, as with all extended metaphors, this one is imperfect.

But I appreciate a later point he makes about this image:
that as unsatisfying as we might find some of the other windows,
that the one over-arching rule of this great, rambling cathedral
is that we don’t throw rocks through the windows cherished by others.

I agree with that, and so I endeavour to the degree I possibly can
to understand what brings meaning into the lives of others,
even when I find it personally incomprehensible, or even offensive.

The best tool I’ve found is to simply share the light
that shines through the windows that resonate for me—

the ones that speak to the depths of the human experience,
the wisdom of the ages, the marvels of science,
and the wonders of the natural world.

I appreciate that many are committed to their own windows,
and not particularly interested in mine.

And I'm reminded from time to time that others
are sometimes baffled by my beliefs and our beliefs,
wondering how such a seemingly free and easy faith can't be worth all that much.

But we who hold this faith in our hearts know that isn't true.

Without any doubt, I believe Unitarian Universalism
is the hardest religion you will ever love—the toughest one to practice.

Sure, it takes courage to take vows of poverty,
or commit to meditation around the clock,
to fast for days or forgo all of life's pleasures for the sake of one's religion,
but to live with the theological diversity that is our faith
is not for the faint of heart.

Nor is the task of constructing a faith for oneself
from the array of tools and materials this tradition has to offer.

To say nothing of what it means to invest deeply in community
and live into the power of making and keeping covenants with other people.

So, as we move through this time of great transition as a congregation,
let us continue to build it up with the dedication of our hands and hearts,
reaching out, tending those wondrous webs of being, that connect us and keep us,
that this might truly be a house of peace for all people,
for our own time, and for generations still to come.

So may it be.