

Association Sunday

October 12, 2008

Who would we be without each other?

Would we be lonely? Would we be sad? Would we be finally, totally at peace?

UU Singer/songwriter Peter Mayer, who wrote "Blue Boat Home", also has a song about introverts. "People upset me when they interrupt me with calls and unannounced visits, and on top of that when they chat about nothing at all and I ask what is it? I do have a lot to do. Can you return at two? I will not be here by then. Just leave what you need me for on a note on the door so I can ignore it, my friend."

"I'd like to hire my own secretary who's mean, someone who says things like, "Mr. Mayer can't be reached; he is not in, you see. He's in a meeting 'till ten. I suppose I could take your name. Who are you anyway? Please never call here again."" ("The Introvert Song", from the album "Elements")

Some of us are clearly more externally-oriented than others. But humans are made to be social. We are made to live among each other, to laugh and cry together, to love and fight and heal in unending circles of days and months and years. No matter how introverted we are, there is a basic human need for each other; without touch, without companions, infants die and adults go insane. We are made for contact: challenging contact, intimate contact, creative contact, religious contact.

Each of us has different priorities:

Some of us come for the intellectual stimulation; some for the emotional support; some come for conversation, or comfort, or spiritual enrichment. The one thing that everyone among us seems to agree on is community. Connection. People. We engage in ritual, in struggle, and in caring together. We know we are not isolated, not rejected, not unworthy, despite a nagging sense that every day we are given is an unexpected grace. We are witnessed and we witness others; and in seeing and being seen we are made somehow more truly who we are. We need this. We crave it. We wonder:

If a person's life is transformed and no one sees it, is the transformation real?

Yesterday was National Coming Out Day, a day set aside to honor and encourage people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or asexual to come out--to name their own identity and let it be visible, because there is something different about being known really, being known entirely. This visibility in community is crucial. This visibility transforms not just individuals but whole communities over and over again. Each coming out--each claiming of identity--reinforces and reestablishes the sanctity of self-definition and the obligation we each have to continue to discover and examine ourselves and to share what we have learned. If we are so ashamed of what we have learned, or so afraid of others' shame that we are unwilling to bring it to light, then either the shame or the quality must change. Only our hearts can tell us which is wrong. Over time, shame that festers in a community, coupled with lack of safety and lack of visibility can be fatal. Ten years ago today Matthew Shepherd died from exposure and untreated injuries after having been robbed, beaten, tortured, tied to a fence and left for dead because he was gay. It was eighteen hours before someone found him, and five days from the attack to his death. At the time, there was no state or federal law under which Matthew Shepherd's death could be prosecuted as a hate crime.

Invisibility kills. Isolation kills. Silence kills.

It also snowballs. If no one talks about something, then the lesson is that it is either shameful or nonexistent or both. And it's not just about sexual orientation. Among liberals, there are those who wince if they hear the word church. They may have had a bad experience; they may believe that theologically and socially conservative churches are the only churches out here. And since none of their friends talk about church, except perhaps the Quakers, they never learn anything different.

If we think we're alone then one bad day, one disheartening development, one loss of strong leadership could rip out our backbone. We can't let that happen.

It's important for us to be visible as liberal religious. It's important for us to be vocal and present; it's important for our faith to inform all the contexts of our lives, because that is how faith changes culture--not by bringing prayer into schools but by transforming everyday moments into spiritual practice. But we cannot do it alone. Not in a place and time where majority rules, but only if the majority claims its power and speaks and votes and lives with the courage of its convictions. And we require support. And we require tools. And we require the validation of others' presence and witness with us.

We are everywhere. And we are claiming our place and our voice. Starting now.

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I heard a story this week about one of our youth members, who, when confronted by a fellow student's homophobia, said, "What, don't you believe in love?" and then followed up with, "I think we need to talk about this..."

Spoken like a true Unitarian Universalist--from belief to discussion. I can't tell you how comforting it is to know that I'm not the only one who would approach it that way, even in high school. Our membership in our congregations and in other communities of like-minded people helps us do things like that. It helps us know we are not alone; it helps us normalize our cutting-edge justice ministry. In our congregations we pool our resources to make change--we pool our energy to raise money to heat homes that would otherwise freeze this winter; we pool our hope, we pool our voices to impact legislation and we filter out in ones and twos because we are the people who live here, and we are the people who practice our faith here and that changes the place itself.

Who we are, and how we live our faith, changes Ellsworth and Bar Harbor and Blue Hill and Trenton and Town Hill and Sullivan and Stuben and Franklin and Dedham and Bucksport and Orland. This is an empowered and empowering religion, because we know that every voice matters. What we change is not whether we listen but where and how we listen; we are forever looking for better ways to hear and be heard, to see and be seen, to give and to receive. Our living tradition can never give up on being alive, so we are stuck with each other in all the awkward beauty of human existence.

Some of it truly is beautiful.
Some of it is a terrible mess.

But we are learning. Even since 1961, since the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations from the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, we have learned, we have grown, we have formed and reformed. We even built it into our bylaws. Those seven principles, the ones that start with "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" that we hold so dear are not fixed. The framers of our Association wanted to be sure that we would never take up a creed; that we would be in constant discernment and dialogue about who we are and what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist; they did not want the words to become more important than their execution, or so routine as to be invisible. So they said we needed a statement of principles and a statement of our purpose, but they also said it was subject to regular review. We are in the midst of that regular review right now. Our Commission on Appraisal has drafted a revision which is available for comment until October 16th. That's this week. If you care what we say we believe, the comment form is open for everyone. Go to our denominational website and read the draft. Decide what you think. Call your friends. Talk it over. Write it down and send it in. This is our democratic process at work.

This is our Association. This is who we are.

And the Association is how we pool our resources as congregations. Our elected leaders in the Association do an enormous amount of work on our behalf. They are paid and volunteer; they serve on all kinds of commissions and committees and working groups. On our behalf they plan the General Assembly; they write and revise policy that keeps us together. We have a trauma ministry team that is available when crisis hits, trained and coordinated by staff and volunteers for us. We have district staff that advise us on everything for which we have questions, who provide materials and consultation regarding programming for children and youth, who organize workshops and invite us to attend. We have information coordinators who make sure that what we need to know is on the website and in the congregational packet; who tell us when something tragic happens half a country away and who figure out what we can do to help; what we can do to reach out; what we can do to be connected. We have experts in media relations and experts in advertising; we have an entire staff group devoted to developing and monitoring the professional ministry, including assistance with ministerial settlement by which process I came here. Our Growth Team is attending regular workshops to learn about four different kinds of growth: growth in numbers, growth in spiritual depth, growth in outreach, and growth in institutional structure. This four-pronged way of understanding our own development is enriching all of our programming as we examine ourselves and our systems for ways that they can be ministries and not just lists to-do. The growth project is nourishing your lay leadership here as they work for this church. The office of Identity Based Ministries covers queer issues, people-of-color issues, and accessibility issues; they have helped us with assistive listening devices and getting electronic copies of books, and they are connecting with us regarding the 25th anniversary of Charlie Howard's murder--these are not remote, uninterested offices. They are phones and email boxes staffed by real people whose real ministry is to all of us--because we have asked them to do it.

And like a congregation's clergy, they are supported by our contributions. Each congregation is asked to pay what is known as "fair share" -- an amount calculated based on our signed membership, even though every congregation serves many more people than have signed its rolls. That amount goes to pay for salaries, for photocopies, for expert consultations, for trainings, for airfare, for publicity, for outreach, for our legislative office in Washington DC that takes our faith to our representatives in federal government. This money, like all the money we give here, goes to do our work with each other and in the world.

It connects us. It comforts us. It educates us. It enriches us. It emboldens and empowers us.

This congregation has, for several years, chosen not to pay its fair share. This year, we have budgeted for 39% of our fair share contribution. Economic times are tough. Many of us are scared about money, about heat, about security, about life as we have always know it. But this

Association, this means of connection with others who share our beliefs and values; whose hopes are like ours; whose dreams are like ours; whose vision of a better world has the same foundation as ours; this Association, in times of fear and despair, is one of our biggest buoys; it is one of our best lifelines. In these times, more than most others, we need each other. And we need the Association among us and the connections between us, to keep hope alive.

Just for this service I have moved the offering.

This is something that can go beyond hope. This is one thing we can *do*.

This is Association Sunday, a time for us to celebrate and give thanks for this connection across countries and continents, for us to remember once again that we are not alone. You have heard why the association is important. Let us work together, let us put our shoulders to the wheel together, and let us together continue, despite the odds, to build the world of our dreams. This morning's non-pledge offering will go to increase that 39% of our fair share to something a bit more respectable. We are asked to give \$56 per member, per year. If you will pay for one person, right now, as a non-pledge contribution, then what we have already budgeted can cover the fair share for someone among us who needs to be helped, who needs to be carried, who needs a hand through these tough times. If there are 50 people here and each of you will give \$56, we will nearly make our fair share. If there are 60 people here and each of you give \$56, we will more than make it. If you can pay for two, you will give the gift of congregational services for someone who desperately needs it. This church is your spiritual home. We are the place where you can come when you are weeping; where you can come when you are grieving; where you can come when you are scared or confused or lonely or jumping with joy, and we will be with you. Ours is a ministry of presence, a ministry of comfort, and a ministry of transformation. Let us use our generosity and power to support that ministry today.

The offering will now be given and received.