

Sermon 09/18/11 – Where Everybody Knows Your Name

When I was a young boy, my social life was encompassed largely at the local schoolyard a block away. All events good and bad happened there. There were softball and basketball games, there were drug dealers and their customers, gamblers, a gang, the wannabees, the hangers on, etc. And yet everybody knew what the rules of the yard were, how to communicate with each other, what line in the sand, or in this case a line in the cement not to cross. And then of course around dinner time I would always hear my mother calling. We literally could see the yard from the back of my house. My mother calling for me for dinner didn't go over for me so well in the yard. So I learned to find out when dinner was each night beforehand. We did live in close knit community and we knew most every neighbor on our block. That may seem like an old fashioned story these days. It made it very hard to get away with anything in the community I lived. So it forced me to go outside the neighborhood if was to do anything outside the norm. I thought about this when my son lived with me and he and his girlfriend were playing the video game Call of Duty. For the record a very violent video game. But my point is, he plays with people all over the world, from Korea, Germany, Even people from Switzerland who I guess for video games are not neutral. We have Facebook, which allows me to be in contact with people all over the country and the world.

We choose our communities, whether by church, by video game or friend invites by work choices. In the past our choices were forced upon us. Sometime by geography or our work or our birth religion. People didn't change jobs, houses or religion often, we were thrust together into situations with people who in many ways might not have been like us, and we had to figure out how to live together. But today, we truly live a global community Today we can hear about revolutions in Libya and famine in East Africa, and we often don't know the people who live down the block from us and what their challenges are or what their children are up to..

Today with so much information we have, we have to make choices. Do I worry about my neighbor, or do I worry about the people in Somolia. Do I worry about someone who is different than me, but close by, or do I worry about someone who is more like me but maybe farther away. I would like to think we can do it all. That we can consider all people by the mere fact of our common humanity connected and cared for. But due to limitations of time we have to choose, and one of those choices we make is about religion. And we have chosen for our religion Unitarian Universalism. Of course within our unique religion, where our congregational mission calls us to embrace individual searches for meaning, leads different people to choose different theological paths, and leads to the creation of a pluralistic community. In order to create such a community, we have to become a covenantal community. How do we agree to walk together on this religious journey. Today within this congregation we have people who gain wisdom from our different sources. Humanist teachings Earth Centered Religions, prophetic men and women, Jewish and Christian traditions, other world religions,

Yet we all come together for Sunday Service to share this part of our lives with each other. Why do people come to Sunday Services. I like to imagine people listen intently to the service, and try to obtain meaning and understanding from it that can add to their lives. When I sat down to think about today's service, I wondered what makes the worship experience different from say my listening to sermons on my IPOD, or reading the sermon online. There is something unique about the worship experience. I believe what makes it unique is that we are connected to the people around us with whom we worship. That is the hardest part for new members and visitors I imagine, is gaining that connection. So the question is how can we create those connections, but more importantly how can we deepen those connections so that they become meaningful to our lives.

I believe connection circles is one way that can help create that deeply meaningful experience. Connection Circles give us the opportunity to explore with a group of people, the deep questions of life, in an environment that is trusting and nonjudgmental. So just what are Connection Circles. They are a group of 6-10 people who commit to getting together once or twice a month for approx. nine months. Each group has a leader called a facilitator. I look at connection circles almost as a personalized worship service. There is a chalice lighting. There is a check in with each other to find out how our lives have been in the past month. This as much as anything is what makes connections circles special. We often share the joys and sorrows of each member over the trajectory of a period of time. It is the beginning of forming connections. It is more than just a quick hello how are you that we give after service. We have a reading, and then we have a sharing of ideas and thoughts on a topic chosen by the facilitator. The discussion topics encourage us to think deeply about our lives and the world. These are not groups to debate a topic, but to share our ideas and experiences, and hear others ideas and experiences. All of these discussions deepen the meaningful connection we create with others in the group

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The groups meet in peoples homes or at the congregation, n different nights of the week. We also during the year we will have 8 week connection circle sessions. After the service today John Dunsheath and I will stay in front to answer any questions and you will be able to sign up for a group if you are interested. What I have found is truly unique about connection circles is that the connections that are created with people you might not otherwise have had the opportunity to create a connection with without the connection circle. When I first started in this religion, my children were young and religious education, so I tended to volunteer and hang out with the other parents and teachers. But there was this older women who always sat in the front of the congregation who wore a hat. I always wondered about that, but at that time in my life, I was not the type of person who would go up and ask a stranger why are you wearing a hat. But as it turns out we ended up in the connection circle and although there was a large difference in our ages, we became close friends and my life was enriched by knowing her. I liken this concept of meeting people that might be different from you in someway, somewhat to my having moved to Greenwich Village in Manhattan after growing up in the Bronx. In the Bronx, there was a certain homogenous cultural way of being. There was that line in the sand that was not crossed. But in Greenwich Village, there were no lines in the sand...and walking side by side down the street were Business people, punk rockers, young, old, Gay, Straight, Starving artists, and people with trust funds. This diversity of life walked side by side, accepting of each other. It taught me that it was OK to be and think differently and that diverse people can live together peacefully. What connection circles create is a means to allow all people, not just to walk side by side together but to meet, connect and develop relationships with each other. It is a way to build the foundation, and expand our beloved community so that we can create and spread true peace and harmony throughout the world.

The choices I have made throughout my life had kept me going at full speed 100% of the time, whether it was an demanding job, graduate school, congregational activities, or just staying home and playing video games with my children, which along time ago, I have given up any hope of ever winning again. In fact I was commenting to a friend the other day how it was almost two years before I realized that my son was letting me win at video games, so I would keep playing. But my point is, we are often always so busy doing. There is never time to just stop and think about those big issue questions. Therefore it requires intentionality to show up to do this work. There is a causal effect to our actions. If we are not intentional about anything in our lives the wind will take us where it may. There is sometimes uncertainty in the outcomes of actions, but if we are intentional in showing up we can be ready when the opportunity avails itself.

I was reminded of this when I had the privilege to hear Rev Clark Olsen speak at a Allies for Racial Equity conference a couple of years ago – he is the minister emeritus in Asheville NC. He as many other UU ministers did, joined the call by Martin Luther King Jr. to March in Selma in 1965. So just to give a little context for those who may not know about Selma. In 1965 during the height of the civil rights movement there was a march in Selma Alabama to support voting rights for African Americans. During the first march, the marchers were attacked and brutally beaten by police. Martin Luther King Jr. put out a call for all people of faith to come and join him in a second march in Selma. I have read that Approximately 20% of Unitarian Universalist Ministers attended this second march. The Rev. James Reeb a UU minister went to Selma. The evening after the second march, Rev. Reeb, Rev Olsen and another UU minister were beaten by white supremacists and James Reeb died from his injuries. Rev. Olsen was the person standing next to the Rev. James Reeb when they were attacked and he retold the story of that night. James Reeb died on March 11th 1965. On March 17th President Johnson sent the voting rights bill to Congress naming the murder of Rev. James Reeb as a justification for the bill. Rev. Reeb's death and the beating of Olsen and the other UU minister seemed to galvanize the nation more than all the injustice to and murder of African Americans...but something that Rev. Olsen said that night really stuck with me. He said When he decided to attend this march, he was not thinking of being involved in something monumental

He did not think he would be involved in something transformational, both personally and societal. He just showed up. He showed up to give his support for what he believed in. How often is that the case in our lives. We just happen to be somewhere and events conspire to change the trajectory of our lives. We often like to believe we can plan and choose the manner and fate of our destiny, but we never really know when the opportunity to do so will take place. So I encourage you to show up. Show up at congregation for services every Sunday, Show up at service projects, show up city council meetings. show up at one of the many adult religious education classes offered, show up to help clean dishes at coffee hour, show up at connection circles, show up at whatever it is that you are passionate about here and want to support. Show up and amazing things can happen. Show up and you will find connections that can last a lifetime. Show up and your life can be transformed

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So as the song that was sung as our opening hymn says “Come, Come whoever you are”. Such a simple song, Only 20 words, but so much depth. (yes I actually counted the words) Come, Come whoever you are – we welcome all, just as is said at the beginning of the service, we welcome all of whatever age, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or religious background, it doesn’t matter. Connection Circles can provide that true sense of universalism.

Wanderer – We are wanderers. There is an old saying “that all who wander are not lost.” No we are well grounded, but searching. Maybe for better answers, maybe for higher spiritual ground, but we are not satisfied with the status quo. And we will go to the ends of the earth, or deep inside ourselves to search for answers to life’s questions.

“Worshipper” – Everything we do we should do with a worshipful attitude. An attitude of love and compassion.

“Lover of leaving” – We must be willing to discard some of long held preconceived notions. We must be willing to leave our distrust of others behind us, we must leave behind the cynicism that is endemic in this world, so that we can move forward to achieving our dreams.

“Ours is no caravan of despair” – We are hopeful, and believe that we can create a peaceful, sustainable world for all people. But we are not naïve. We know it will be a journey, and we know we cannot do it individually, that it will take a caravan of people. This is why we come together.

“Come yet again come” – yes we must continually renew ourselves, to continually fill our souls with the nourishment of what we believe in. How do we as Unitarian Universalist renew ourselves? How do we as Unitarian Universalists fill our souls up to do the Good work that needs to be done?

I believe one answer is connection circles. If we are going to build a compassionate life, If we are going to build a just community, If we are to build a world of peace and harmony, it has to start here, with that caravan of people that will stand beside us as we journey down that path, with the people that will support us as we press forward with our search, with the people that will catch us if we fall, with the people that will walk with us in the darkness so we are not alone, with the people that will help lift us up as we climb to the top of the mountain. Now you may saying to yourself, how does all that happen just from connection circles. Well I suggest you join one and find out. May it be so.