

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Barriers to Authentic Community”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 26, 2010

Spoken Meditation

"To Whom it May Concern"

Hey God, this is Sam
I'd like to talk to you - I'm told you created this planet
and then populated it with plants, animals and people ...
and now they're running rampant all over it
killing and eating each other and
treating the earth like a supply closet and sewer.

Hello? If you haven't noticed, things are getting pretty bad down here,
We're running out of fresh water, exhausting the soil, eating all the fish,
And we're destabilizing the climate with greenhouse gases and toxic waste.
It seems like there are just too many of us to live sustainably.

Now, I don't want to be a complainer,
but this body you supposedly gave me has a few problems with it,
and now its beginning to wear out.
It's not just me, I've got a congregation full of people here
and they've all got lots of problems their dealing with too.

I know I don't have the answers ... so
If you are trying to respond to all these problems,
and, let me just say, I do have my doubts about this,
we need that help now!!!

Many of us are ready to do our part.
Yes, I know your prophets and their scriptures have told us
If we could all just love each other a little bit more
and if we could all help each other a little bit more
that would make a positive difference.

If you could help us with this, I'd really appreciate it ...
That is, if your listening and paying attention to me ...

I know you must have a lot on your plate.

But just in case you're just a creation of our imagination,
 maybe we, who are real and are here right now,
 could listen a little better to each other
 and respond to what we hear, as best we can.

In any case,
 let us be grateful for our consciousness of the gift of life,
 and use that gift for the benefit of the whole of life.

Sermon

You've ordered a piece of pie. The waiter places the slice before you with one edge of the pie parallel to the edge of the table in front of you. What do you do? How many start eating the pie without touching the plate? How many first turn the pie so the point of the pie points toward you? How many turn it the other way and begin eating the crust first? Notice if you have any preference and how you feel about those who don't share your preference.

One episode of the television series "All in the Family" sticks in my memory. In this episode, the son-in-law, Michael, is seen putting on a shoe over his sock *before* putting on the other sock. Archie Bunker, his father-in-law and the star of the show, finds this very disturbing. "Everyone knows you have to put on both socks before putting on your shoes," he protests. This is another indictment against the "meathead" who, once again, proves he isn't good enough for his daughter Gloria. And this being a comedy show, they both go at it and a trivial dressing preference escalates into a major confrontation.

When I dream of peace and harmony in the world, Michael and Archie's animosity help me remember just how difficult it is for us to get along. The ease with which people can divide and attack each other is astonishing.

Just start talking with a stranger about abortion, global warming, gun control or immigration. In less than a minute you will know whether the stranger is one of them or one of us. Of course, I have strong opinions about these issues as I expect everyone in this room does. Sometimes, I blog on these issues on the Times Union web site and usually get the most critical comments when these themes are highlighted. I'm very careful here about how I talk about politics from the pulpit just for this reason. I look for the moral or ethical dimension that aligns with our Unitarian Universalist values and avoid expressing my personal opinions that may or may not reflect the politics of others in this community. Yes, I've heard of Unitarians described as the religious wing of the Democrats. So, partly for that reason, I have, as a mission, to be equally friendly to Democrats, Republicans, Conservatives, and the Working Family party members. Please let me know when I miss that mark.

But if you really want to stir up trouble, start talking about identity issues. The divisions

between us around personal identity go to the core of who we are, what we believe and what we value. Those divisions can lie dormant for generations then rise up with catastrophic results.

A major horror of the twentieth century happened in Germany with the identification of Jews, Poles, Gypsy's, homosexuals, and non-Aryans as *other* to be excluded, marginalized and removed from society. People who didn't even realize they had one of these identities were targeted for death. The same thing happened in the former Yugoslavia as Muslims were singled out for persecution. Then in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis. What seem like transparent differences in communities can become major sources of division that disrupt generations of people's lives with mayhem and destruction.

The divisions that agitate Unitarian Universalists are not so great, I'm thankful to report. While we honor personal differences on political issues, we have general agreement on women's reproductive rights, religious freedom and the goal of a peaceful, pluralistic world community for example. There is one major religious issue, however, that can severely divide us: God.

Other clergy look at me quizzically when I tell them this. For them, their belief in and theology about God is what defines them and holds them together. That is not the case for contemporary Unitarian Universalists. We have both believers and atheists here - and both are welcome. We agree to have differences on belief and make shared values the core of our community. But, at times, the detente can wear thin. And where it is felt most strongly is in this room depending on what I say or do. Yes, we give ministers the freedom of the pulpit – but you also have the freedom to throw me out and get a new minister more to your liking. Ministry in a Unitarian Universalist congregation can be a bit of a tight rope walk without a net each Sunday.

How we view God has always been a source of controversy. Unitarians defined themselves originally by questioning the divinity of Jesus as co-eternal with God. Universalists read the Bible and found an Old Testament God completely reconciled with humanity by Jesus' identification with and sacrifice for all humanity. The transcendentalists like Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker departed from the exclusively Christian understanding of God, seeking an intuitive experience of God they often found in the natural world. Biblical archeology, criticism and textual study attacking Biblical authority, along with the advancement of science to explain and correct religious understanding, undermined traditional belief in God among us. The horror of World War drove many to question the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God who would permit such indiscriminate violence.

The latent theological tension in our community is mostly resolved ... by avoiding it. In my experience, those with strong attachment to their views, for God or against God, usually aren't persuaded by rational argument. So far, the ineffable hasn't responded well to

scientific study and analysis. Most of us are reconciled to the reality that God's existence or non-existence isn't rationally provable.

So here is the million dollar question: how do we create and maintain a strong, vibrant, religious community when we don't share a common belief about God?

Last week I talked about two different kinds of community, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. *gemeinschaft* has, as its model, kinship and tribal community. The kind of belonging and identity offered by this form of community transcends individual interests, likes and dislikes. Traditionally, these kind of communities demand complete commitment. "These are my people for whom I'm ready to give everything, including my life," might be said of a family or a tribe. The whole is far more important than any individual.

Opposed to that is a newer form of community based not on kinship and tribal relationships but rather on common self-interest. We gather in this form of community to accomplish mutual goals and offer each other support. As long as our goals are in alignment and support is being offered, all is well. But when the goals of the group members diverge or feelings of difference divide the group, the community can easily fall apart. If my employer doesn't pay me competitively, off to a new employer I go willingly. If my performance doesn't meet some standard, out I go unwillingly. If the schools in one district don't meet my expectations, I'll move to another district. If the taxes are too high one town, I'll move to another. Whether voluntary association, town or school district, my loyalty is to my self-interest not the other community members whom I often don't even know by sight or name.

The movement from being part of *gemeinschaft* oriented communities to *gesellschaft* oriented communities has been happening for millenia as people congregate into larger and larger communities, often anonymous and disconnected from each other. Unless you're following the trend to be part of community supported agriculture, you don't know the farmer whose cow gave you your milk, or whose lettuce and tomatoes are the foundations of your salad, who makes your clothes, who assembles your electronic gadgets, who picks up the garbage, who patrols our streets, or who cooks your food in restaurants. More and more machines, facilitate our lifestyle rather than people. And in the process, true authentic community is rarer and rarer in a mass society where everything, even caring for the sick, disabled and elderly, is offered as fee for service.

While we all want good contractual services, without discrimination, based on fair and equitable exchange, we want something more when it comes to community.

Dr. Mary Rousseau, in her book, *Community: the Tie That Binds*, offers a classic illustration of what authentic community looks like:

A robber goes into a store, the police show up while the robbery is in progress, and the robber takes a man and his four-year-old daughter hostage. As the robber becomes agitated and threatens to kill the child if he can't get away, a policeman offers himself in exchange for the

child as a hostage. The robber accepts the exchange. During the exchange the father of the four-year-old also escapes out the back door. The robber becomes upset, there is a volley of gunfire and both the robber and the policeman are killed in a hail of police bullets.
(paraphrased)

In the social contract view of community, there is no rational reason for the policeman to offer his life in exchange for the child's. Both lives are equally valuable. The policeman is employed to provide a service that puts him at risk but does not require him to endanger his life in this way. If he had his own small children, he would deprive them of a father. He had no obligation to offer his life. From social contract theory, his action was foolish and a needless waste of his life.

As it turned out, he was hailed as a hero in that town and a statue was erected in his honor. Why? Because the policeman's complete commitment to his community guided his actions. Rather than calculating his actions from rational self-interest, he responded with altruistic love based on his deep commitment to the citizens of his town.

Authentic community requires a dedication and commitment that is not calculated by expected outcomes and self-interest. That is because authentic community cannot be created by measuring outcomes. It can only be created and sustained by a disciplined commitment, expressed as altruistic love. Paradoxically, the fulfillment and satisfaction of authentic community isn't necessarily found in the results. It is more often found in holding the intention to love and following through on it.

People who work in hospice know this kind of love well. Hospice workers offer love to someone who is going to die. Often the dying process is uncomfortable and unpleasant. Hospice workers must deal again and again with their own fear of death and watch someone whom they often develop loving feelings for slip away. Yet, in the altruistic offering of that love, there is tremendous meaning and satisfaction.

As most of the gray hairs in this room know, trying to build perfect utopian communities is close to if not impossible. I've long ago reconciled myself to the presence of dissatisfaction in congregations. Egos are constantly bumping into each other. As soon as I address a problem over here, another shows up over there. I'm happy if unhappiness stays at a low enough level to stay out of sight of the visitors checking us out. Real, authentic community isn't something you can *get* here, like some commodity. It is only something you can *help to create* here through offering altruistic love to each other and hope for the best. It isn't all that complicated. As the Magic Penny song goes, "Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more."

What I think we are trying to do in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, is remove as many barriers to altruistic love as we can. None of us have all the answers to life's persistent questions no matter how sure we are of our answers. Those who believe in God could be

wrong. Those of us who don't believe in God could be wrong. It may be that we won't find out even after we're dead! Answers to these questions may be truly unknowable by the human mind.

The lubricant to assist in creating and maintaining authentic community is our relationships. I may not like to sing old war horse Protestant hymns, but when my dear own friend next to me sings them with tears in her eyes, I'm a little more willing to do so. When I know how helpful prayer to a loving and living God has been to the friend on the other side of me mourning the death of his child, I soften a little around prayer.

Altruistic love is, in reality, the *only* source of authentic community. That love isn't dependent on how you pray or don't pray, whether you believe in God or don't believe in God. I can't plant that love in you with a fantastic sermon, meditation or prayer. What matters is what guides your heart and what intentions motivate your actions

Ultimately it is love and only freely offered love that holds this congregation together. And I'm grateful there is a lot of it here.

Benediction

The ant doesn't work for herself alone.

The bee doesn't collect pollen for her private reserve.

The goose preparing to travel south doesn't fly solo.

Like the ants, bees and geese,

We are social creatures who form communities.

Like the ants, bees and geese,

We cannot make authentic communities to serve self-interests.

A shared heart must be at the center.

May we discover, return to and enjoy

the meaning and fulfillment that come

with devotion to community building and

community sustaining.