

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Building Community at FUUSA”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 31, 2010

SERMON

Our new strategic plan passed in December had as its first objective to address “our longing for help in and opportunities for reaching out to others across our differences.” Today will be our first response offering that help by having our “Get Connected Activities Fair” in Emerson Community Hall after this service concludes. I strongly encourage you to stay and be part of it. As many of those who are strongly connected here know well, it is getting involved that fulfills that longing.

Reflecting on the opposite of community this week helped me remember this. The first writing exercise of our “Building the World We Dream About” class led by Chris Antal and Jacqui Williams stimulated feelings I haven't had in a long time. The twelve session course explores how to create a welcoming climate around race and ethnicity as we did with GLBT folks in the 1990's. I was very pleased to see the twenty some people from our congregation who registered and showed up last Monday.

The exercise that was stimulating for me was remembering and writing about a time when I felt like an outsider. What came to mind was moving with my family to live in England for a year when I was ten years old in 1967. My father was on his first sabbatical year from teaching at the University of Delaware. He planned the trip abroad to do research and brought my mother, sister and me along with him. My sister and I were enrolled in the local elementary school I was the only American in my “form” or class.

As I was different from everyone else, I got teased and called a yankee. I didn't know the local customs and my speech patterns were odd to my classmates. I'd never played soccer before and was terrible at it. They made fun of my prominent ears and called me “Frankenstein Jr.” I remember how much that hurt. It took several months for me to get oriented to the school and make a few friends. During that fall, I felt intensely isolated and alone. Like the little boy in the story, I was an outsider. I didn't have any sense of community.

This experience made a strong impression because I'd never felt like this before. Growing up on Dallas Avenue, in Newark, Delaware, I always had friends on my street. I started first grade at West Park Elementary with many neighbors I knew. On Sundays, I attended our Unitarian Fellowship that was across the street from my school. (We actually used classrooms in the elementary school for our Religious Education program) As a sociable kid who made friends easily, I always had playmates who I could call. My parents were well networked in civic

organizations too. Community felt easy and natural as I was growing up. To be yanked out of my comfortable nest gave me a taste of what an increasing number of people experience today who do not have a sense of community.

Robert Putnam published an article in 1995 noting a general decrease in civic involvement using the example of the decline of bowling leagues. When his research was challenged, he published the book, *Bowling Alone*, in 2000, extensively documenting this decline. He noted, "The overall decline in civic participation cuts across virtually all social and demographic groups. It is evident among both women and men, in all regions of the country, and in cities and towns of all sizes. It also is evident across racial groups, religious traditions, political parties, occupational categories, social classes and household types." (<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1965>)

What is the evidence? With stunning consistency, virtually every indicator of civic engagement currently available shows the same pattern of increase followed by stagnation and decline -- newspaper reading; TV news watching; attending political meetings; petition signing; running for public office; attending public meetings; serving as an officer or committee member in any local clubs or organizations; writing letters to the editor; participating in local meetings of national organizations; attending religious services; socializing informally with friends, relatives or neighbors; attending club meetings; joining unions; entertaining friends at home; participating in picnics; eating the evening meal with the whole family; going out to bars, nightclubs, discos or taverns; playing cards; sending greeting cards; attending parties; playing sports; donating money as a percentage of income; working on community projects; giving blood.

(<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1965>)

Why this erosion of involvement in public life? The likely suspect often cited is electronic communication. This waning of community was first blamed in the 1920's on the advent of radio. In the 1960's, television started getting the blame. Today an even more absorbing form of electronic communication dominates our attention: computers.

This will be no surprise to any of us who spend eight or more hours a day in front of one. The latest trend though is using computers for social networking.

I'm not sure when I first signed on to Facebook, but I felt the social pressure to join. I was getting lots of emails from my ministerial colleagues inviting me to join. Out of curiosity, I signed up just to see what it was all about. Now I have about 250 "friends." I have spent enough time on it however, to get some general impressions of electronic social networking.

It does have some great uses such as a way to pass around photos and to send emails to relatives that don't get lost in their regular email box. One of the surprises for me about the medium was how it encouraged the feeling of connection to people I don't regularly correspond

with like old high school friends. Seeing the photo of a kid's birthday party or shots from a vacation, the celebration of a promotion or the sadness of the death of a relative connects me emotionally to their humanity. Just knowing someone enjoyed a small kindness from another person could lift my spirits too.

Is this "real" community or is it "fake" community? I'd call it, "thin" community. Reading about my beloved cousins in Cambridge, Massachusetts reinforces my positive regard for them built from face to face connections. As a reinforcement of existing relationships, facebook can be useful. I wouldn't say that it has built community with those people I don't know very well who I have friended.

Another way electronic communication is being used to create community is through web sites like Meetup.com. This site facilitates people meeting face to face around common interests. While this may be an effective method of people finding each other, the medium is really a synthesis of new and old methods of creating community. Once people are face to face, they are building community the same way people always have. Yet I suspect these transient groups mostly create thin community that doesn't have much depth or staying power.

In contrast, religious organizations continue to be the most satisfying experience of community for many people. Putnam notes what has always been true in my experience, that:

Regular religious services attenders meet many more people weekly than non-worshippers, making religious institutions a prime forum for informal social capital building. At the same time, religious faith provides a moral foundation for civic regeneration. Faith gives meaning to community service and good will, forging a spiritual connection between individual impulses and great public issues. That is, religion helps people to internalize an orientation to the public good. Because faith has such power to transform lives, faith-based programs can enjoy success where secular programs have failed.

<http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Religion.pdf>

In contrast to the thin community one might create electronically, our religious community here is fat, deep and wide. From the delightfully nourishing esthetic experience of sitting with others in this awesome space hearing beautiful music and inspiring words, to the friendly faces who offer smiles and welcome each week, to the opportunities to share your time, talent and treasure, put it all together and there isn't much like it out there in the world. Not only are you welcomed here, you are unconditionally assumed to have something extremely precious and valuable when you walk in the door for the first time: inherent worth and dignity.

Having inherent worth and dignity doesn't necessarily mean we all recognize we've got it or are willing to see it in each other. Many of us have been deeply wounded by religious traditions that make this quality conditional on making a profession of their faith, participating in

their rituals or obeying their rules. We have a very different approach to sustaining and nurturing a vital religious community. You don't need to be converted to anything, baptized, sprinkled on or prayed over. You've got inherent worth and dignity already. We honor it in you and in each of us too. This congregation wants to assist you in claiming it, and then in growing and developing it.

One of the best ways of doing this is to get out of our heads and to live it in action. If you want to know you have inherent worth and dignity, treat others as if they have it too. When we do this, through service to each other and those outside these walls, making real in action the truth our interdependence, the spirit that moves through all religions comes to life in us.

This is why we're having our getting connected fair after the service today. Our congregation is abundantly blessed with many ways to direct our energies in the service of this community and the larger community around us. Probably a quarter of our members here today will be sitting behind a table! I'm working hard to keep this service as short as possible to allow you lots of time to visit all the tables set up in Emerson Community Hall to discover the many ways our members serve each other, the neighborhood here, the city of Albany, the State of New York, other Unitarian Universalists, our American society, the world community and the needs of our planet.

The truth I've discovered with interdependence and I hope many of you already know is this: almost always, you get far more back than you give. For those here today who may not feel deeply connected to our congregation, please reflect on what you are giving and how much you are giving. Generosity is the secret to building and sustaining a sense of community. Even as one deeply involved in the life of this community, I discover again and again, the more I give, the more I get back in meaning and satisfaction. Generosity creates a virtuous circle that spirals up and up, lifting us and those around us.

The world I dream about offers that sense of self worth and inclusion, I was lucky enough to enjoy as a child, to every free seeker who walks through our doors. The world I dream about is a place where we are more concerned about what we can offer each other and affirm in each other rather than what we can get from each other and judge in each other. The world I dream about reveals the truth of love's unfailing presence in action.

Today, I want to recruit you to join with me in bringing that world to life.