

“In Whom We Trust”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
March 5, 2017

I trust that you're here because you want to be here this morning.
I trust that you brought your hurts and your hopes with you.
I trust that you have arrived with your mind ajar if not completely open.
I trust that you have a heart that has been broken at least once.
I trust that you have not given up on opening your heart again.
I trust that you each have a story, many stories.
I trust that you each have stories some of which you are comfortable sharing.
I trust that you are accustomed to asking questions, and I know you are accustomed to hearing questions in response.
I trust that you may be somewhat confused by what I just said.

I trust that certain words pack varied punches for you—faith, sanctuary, church, God!
I trust that the word LOVE sits well for all of you.
I trust that each of us struggles to hold hope in the time that is now.
I trust that each of us just plain struggles.

And I trust that we can all take a deep breath—together [do so]. This breath and the next and the next are acts of profound trust. Breathing is what we do first. Trust is our birthright. We are born vulnerable and trust is our only option. Have you ever heard of a cynical infant? A cynical infant makes about as much sense as a sinful infant. Original sin doesn't exist, because there's nothing about sin that could possibly be original. Original cynicism doesn't exist for an only slightly different reason; cynicism needs time to take root and branch through the myriad experiences of our passing years.

In our beginning, trust is instinctive. Our whole beings count on food and shelter and warmth, even love, from our caregivers. When any one of these isn't provided, we humans wilt, or worse, we become wary of receiving those basic needs. Over time, cynicism sprouts, and if unchecked by compassionate and present caregivers and companions, morphs into a cancer of bitterness, even despair.

But when trust takes root, it also sprouts and grows and deepens—even in the face of the most trying circumstances, even in the face of cataclysms of violence. I turn to the credo of that young girl writing in her diary in a cramped garret in Holland:

“Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.” (December 1942)

What deeply layered caregiving had Anne Frank known in her early years that permitted her to declare her trust in the essential goodness of people “despite everything”?

When did you last look into the eyes of a 12-year-old, a 7-year-old, a 3-year-old? If you can't remember, imagine. Pools of experiences savored and suffered, most of them unconscious. How has her trust been earned? How is it reflected? How has his trust been betrayed? How is it reflected? As a long ago therapist said to me when I was breaking free of a toxic marriage and had recounted the physical relief I was feeling, "Your body doesn't lie, Jan. Your body doesn't lie. Trust it."

Close your eyes for a moment. Go back, back to the 12-year-old you, the 7-year-old, the 3-year-old you if you can. How friendly was your world? I don't mean the great big world, but the world of your parents or parent or aunt or grandparents or brothers or sisters? How safe did you feel? How were your basic needs being met—food, shelter, loving touch, comfort and medical care when you were sick, listening to your hurts, celebrating your unbridled joys of accomplishment, including your very first steps? In whom did you trust? Picture her face, his smile.

There is no perfect parent, no perfect caregiver. Total caring and compassionate presence is a tall order. Yet each of us has learned to trust through a person who demonstrates their trustworthiness by considerable and consistent caring and compassionate presence. This doesn't mean they're with us all the time, but when they are, they are really *with us*. As infants and children we're the most needy for high intensity care and compassion. As we grow and *if* we have a foundation of trust honored, our needs for the actual presence of those in whom we trust diminish. We develop the capacity for friendship, for learning and discovery, for self-expression, for intimate relationship, for marriage, and for grace in aging.

What does it take, at this point in your life, to trust someone? Asher has shared his perspective, with the example of his trustful relationship with his dog.

In whom do I trust and why? I offer friendship as an example. Ann, Nancy, Vivian, and Kristen. All are women with whom I have known deep and long friendships. Ann and Nancy are no longer living, and I miss them immensely. How different they were from one another; yet I met both of them during my time as a single parent and budding activism in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair. We connected also through our children, but not because of our children.

Ann I met on a church-sponsored family overnight retreat. Her husband was still living. Our daughters became friends. But it was Ann herself who showed me through her caring attentive behavior that here was a wholly trustworthy friend. She listened. She was neither jarred nor judgmental by whatever I shared with her in confidence. She was consistent in the emotional temper of her responses. Her sense of humor was situational but never at the expense of someone's dignity. And she did not need me to be her only friend. During her memorial service, at which I co-officiated, so many of Ann's friends reported counting her as their *best friend*.

Nancy and I met when the congregation launched its undoing racism initiative. During that initial weekend workshop, I heard Nancy speak her mind, sometimes bluntly, often poetically, always from the heart. I learned that she held milestones and millstones of family life

and bore no grudges, while not beveling the edges of past hurts. I experienced her breadth of understanding. And she listened; she listened. Later this month I will gather with a circle of friends in Montclair to celebrate Nancy's life. I wonder how many of us will count Nancy as our best friend.

In whom I trust—Ann and Nancy and yes, Vivian and Kristen.

Vivian whom I have known since kindergarten, with whom I swam at the local pool every summer of our childhood and lifeguarded at that same pool every summer of our teen years. Vivian, with whom I biked and read and went to the movies and who kept confidences and withheld judgment. During those junior high years, when I was clueless about combatting the game playing and bullying in some other friends, Vivian seemed constitutionally incapable of such behavior. I trusted her; I still do.

Kristen I have known since we were both in our 20's. She was there for me when my first husband was killed in Viet Nam. She was there for me during the trying years of my second marriage and my divorce. She listened. She shared from her own soul, deeply spiritual as she is. And when I drove west with my then two young daughters, for a quasi pilgrimage after the break from my second husband, it was Kristen and her children with whom we stayed and camped on the Continental Divide, bears and all. It was Kristen who is now speaking the raw truth of imminent mortality through the minefield of lung cancer. Whether she lives another 20 years or another 20 days, I trust her as a teacher of living and dying.

Through friendships, intimate relationships, and the seasons of childhood and adulthood that may or may not include marriage and parenthood, through the discernment of our calling in the work world and how we fare in that world, and through our participation in the life of this congregation, our experiences of trust and otherwise shape our engagement. The outcomes are akin to what happens when we cast a stone into a pond at a certain angle. The ripples may be easily visible even to one barely watching or barely detected except to the most attentive.

One of the most painful experiences is a falling out of trust. This is what happens in an intimate relationship gone awry. Marriage doesn't break; trust does. If our trust has been betrayed or we have been a betrayer of trust, our mutual sense of safety flies off the tracks. How difficult it is to restore it. "I forgive you, will you forgive me?" is too simple. Enter a mediator, a facilitator of healing through a process of the parties speaking their truth to one another, listening however painful it is, letting the anger out and the tears flow, and creating the spiritual space for healing in the form of reconciliation. Such healing can usher in a love far deeper than what described the relationship at its outset. Intimate committed love is not for the faint of heart.

So too loving community is not for the faint of heart. Congregational covenants are no stronger than marital vows when it comes to the day in day out interactions, from the petty to the pivotal. From what color to paint the sanctuary (No, we're not considering painting the sanctuary; this is just an example.) to a full-bodied stewardship of time, talents, and treasure, (This is not just an example!), our mettle as a loving community is tested mightily.

The power of covenant lies in its intentionality. While good intentions may pave the road to that place we don't believe in, holding good intentions are not the same as being intentional. "Well, I didn't mean to say that," is a lame excuse for not being intentional, for not being mindful, about what we say. Intentionality of relationship increases the likelihood of communal trust.

For example, the first item in our congregational covenant is to:

"Cherish the well-being of the congregational community above our personal preferences."

Oooh, that's a toughie. It sounds like the common good over what's good for me. Anybody have strong opinions here? Anybody finding it challenging to reach consensus about stuff like the budget? Or how best to communicate who we are? By honoring even the first item of our congregational covenant, we build trust by earning it. If you wonder about the balance of our congregational covenant, just tap my shoulder during coffee hour, and I'll place one in your hands—a covenant, not my shoulder.

In whom do we trust? Our parents? Our children? Our spouse? Our partner? Our colleagues? A few friends? One another? How was your trust honored or not from as far back as you can remember? How does your response tell you how safe it is to trust again? What does this tell you about your capacity to love and be loved? What truths are you willing to tell yourself that can be first steps in healing whatever breaches of trust you have known?

Who has not experienced the sudden revelation of a "fault line" passing underneath your living room, even this sanctuary? Hear again the seasoned wisdom of Robbie Walsh:

When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing.

"Often torn but always healing." Such is the stuff of love that is the fruit of vulnerability that is the fruit of daring to trust again and again.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, Translated by Susan Massotty, Doubleday, 1947.

Robert R. Walsh, "Fault Line," from *Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual*, Skinner House Books, 1992.