

## **“The Community We Are, the Ministries We Share”**

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It’s really confusing to be Unitarian Universalist. Why? There’s this balance, this delicate fragile balance between I and we, me and us. Our Unitarian identity holds up the individual. That iconic scholar Ralph Waldo Emerson practically sanctified the individual, with his emphasis on self-reliance. Then again, Rev. Emerson quit the parish ministry because he just didn’t take to the pastoral part of it, the community part of it. He was a staunch UNI-tarian.

Our Universalist identity holds up the interconnectedness of life, the wovenness of us all—that is, universalism not necessarily with a capital U. Some of you know that I grew up Presbyterian and was a dedicated Presbyterian—which can be scary in its earnest demeanor—all the way through seminary. Then, guess what, I became Jewish. Not too many of you know this. After losing my first husband, also a student at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, in one of the many wars that never should have been fought, I rebounded. I was mesmerized by the charm and intelligence of a man who was also Jewish and who wouldn’t marry me if I too didn’t become Jewish. So I did—in formality that is. It never took, though I went through the full-blown rituals of conversion—another story for another day. Nor did the marriage take, though I have two wonderful daughters from that marriage, two wonderful daughters for whom my husband Dan has been a loving Stepdad.

But I’m getting ahead of myself, way ahead. It was as a Junior Year Abroad, in a Presbyterian program, that I became universalist with a small “u.” I had no idea what Universalism was as a faith. At the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, every nation in the Middle East and most in Europe and a few from this continent, comprised the student body. My roommates were Muslim and Druze. I traded in my presumptive 20/20 vision for a wide-angle lens. All life really was connected. And love in any language of faith is inclusive, expansive, and all about compassion.

It would take another few decades, specifically, after taking my young daughters and leaving an unworkable marriage, for me to discover this faith, Unitarian Universalism, this faith that holds me and many of us in its compelling but complicated folds.

I re-discovered a community in which “we need not think alike to love alike,” echoing the words of the 16th c. Francis David, a Transylvanian preacher. David was Unitarian with a Universalist spirit. Almost 40 years ago, community like none other I had experienced in a faith setting became my spiritual home, my catalyst for social activism, and my inspiration to take up where I left off as an aspiring Presbyterian minister to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. This happened—clearly it happened, or I wouldn’t be with you this morning.

The first “chapter” of my ministry was as a community ministry at All Souls, New York City. My ministry there meant pastoral outreach, organizing faith-based justice work, conducting rites of passage, preaching periodically, and doing trauma response ministry in the aftermath of that September day 15 years ago. Community ministry morphed into an opportunity for parish ministry. I left All Souls for one of those “First Parish” congregations that describe so many tall-spired churches throughout New England.

My experience as lay leader and professional minister echoes the lyrics we sang earlier this morning:

*We gather together to join in the journey,  
confirming, committing our passage to be a true affirmation,  
in joy and tribulation....*

“We Gather TOGETHER.” Ministry is not just about me. It’s SHARED.

A congregant from a previous congregation I served had this to say: “You’re not fully ‘here, now’ unless you’re actively involved and pulling your share. Shared ministry lets each of us ‘be here now.’” She had echoed, unwittingly perhaps, the observation of the Buddhist monk and teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh: “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence.”

Shared ministry has a language. Above all, it is the language of presence offered in community. We are each fragmented into bits and pieces of hope and longing and yearning. We each have cultivated habits of what I call “silo solace”, coaxed by a culture that values independence and competition over interdependence and cooperation. None of us can become whole as a solo act. Religious community is healing—a space in which we tend to what matters most through telling our stories “from deep inside” and heeding one another’s stories. Such is the foundation of our religious education, our worship, our justice making, our music making, and our pastoral and prophetic ministering to one another and our larger world. All are grounded in listening and being listened to, hearing and being heard.

Yet I know that some among you don’t feel heard and are reluctant to share your stories. While I hear from so many within and beyond this congregation how welcoming we are, I also hear from too many that you feel you just don’t “fit in”. I believe every one comes to worship with hope, with a deep breath of gathering up the fragments of your life and anticipating an experience of love and healing. Such an experience depends on each of us, how we reach out to the newcomer, how we reach out to the face we don’t recognize, even though that face may belong to a person who has been a member for many months. Fitting in is all about a sense of belonging. What does it mean to “belong” here? What does it mean for each of us who does feel we belong to extend ourselves to that person we don’t recognize? Each of us can be a healer, and each of us can know healing.

Here we are, gathered in the community that is this Sunday’s congregation. We come from so many places of heart and mind. We bring all the baggage we have ever carried with us to this place and this time, some of it uplifting, some of it weighing us down, preventing us from being present, sealing off that precious gift that we can offer at the altar of community. How will we find healing? How will we heal? How will we find health and wholeness? How will we enhance the health and wholeness of this community? How will we find ourselves amid the holy?

The community we are and are ever becoming, the stories we hear, the stories we tell, and the ministries we share are grounded not in creed, because creed doesn’t flex—and God or whoever knows, we need flexing. The community, the stories, and the ministries are grounded in a covenant of love that is dynamic, ever bending, stretching, straining, vulnerable, and daring. Each of us can be a healer. Each of us can know healing. Only together can we experience the transformative power of this covenant.

I invite each and all of us to reach deeply into our hearts, to share our stories as we can and will, and to listen, to deeply listen, to the stories of one another. Then we can reach out and embrace one another wherever we are, however we are, who ever we are. Then we can move one step closer to community that is beloved and ministry that is shared.

**Sources:**

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