

“Communing in Solitude”
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“Community!” It’s the response I hear again and again when I ask those of you whom I see almost every Sunday what keeps you coming back week after week, year after year. I ask this not just about Sunday mornings, but about your engagement throughout the week, from committee meetings to justice ventures to Small Group Ministry to facilities maintenance projects. Community is precious, sacred. Experiences of community assure us that we are not alone.

Or do they?

I wonder about this morning. As you sit here, hands perhaps folded, arms perhaps crosses, even fidgeting a bit, what is your sense of solitude? How tightly are you wrapped in your own skin? What moves through your mind as you take those inevitable time-outs from what is being said or sung? How connected are you to the person you’re sitting next to or in front of or behind? How is it with your soul? Or has the state of your soul, whatever that might mean, yet displayed on the screen that commands your attention right now?

Pause for a moment and recall a time in your life, a very specific time, when you were most alone. [Wait]

Now recall a time in your life, a specific time, when you most savored being alone. [Wait]

Turn now to a different scenario, another time when you were alone, and you felt isolated, bereft, abandoned even. Perhaps it was a form of solitary confinement, imposed or voluntary. Perhaps what you felt is a hint of why imposed solitary confinement is “cruel and unusual punishment” no matter what the offense.

How does solitude fill you? How does it empty you? How does it matter when you are the one who chooses that solitude?

Again and again I’ve heard it said that New York City is the best place to be alone and the worst place to be lonely. You may wonder how anyone could be alone in “the city that never sleeps.” In this urban environment there are thousands who create silos for themselves, some voluntary, some that would seem inevitable if we catch even a glimpse of some cross-sections of their lives. Such a glimpse goes deeper in a feature story that begins on today’s front page of *The New York Times*. “The Lonely Life of George Bell” is the title of a narrative that moves backward from a death in a Queens apartment, a death with no suspicious happenings except the apparent tragedy of a life lived in one of those silos. If you tend toward depression, I don’t recommend it—reading the article AND living in silo mode. If you wonder how alone someone can be, it reads like a novella, but it’s tragically true.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, that centenarian Unitarian who devoted her life to exploring the wonder of life, especially young lives, understood well the paradox of how we gather in religious community.

We gather in reverence before the wonder of life—
 The wonder of this moment
 The wonder of being together, so close yet so apart—
 Each hidden in our own secret chamber...

I've lived alone and was sometimes lonely. I've lived with roommates and with family. Am I ever alone? Sometimes it seems not. Am I ever lonely? Occasionally, but rarely. Have I ever felt lonely? Absolutely, and sometimes when I was with those I loved. Yet I am blessed by community, by the community of family and friends and most definitely by the community of you who are extended family.

Many of you know that the week before last my husband Dan experienced two critical health incidents, both leading to 911 calls, followed by sirens wailing and emergency trips to Middlesex Hospital. How was it for me? Both times I thought I was losing him. I can't describe this as an experience of loneliness, but of intimacy intensified to the point of anguishing over the potential severance of that bond. Thankfully I didn't, and he is alive and healing right here in this sanctuary this morning. How was it for Dan? What happens when one incident you just don't remember at all and when another, you remember with a retroactive anxiety—I don't know if I'm capturing it—that is still in fragments and returns periodically in fragments. What does it mean to know that you almost died?

One of the most poignant memories for me was the responsiveness of neighbors. Our next-door neighbor showed up in a heartbeat, ready to do whatever. Our neighbors across the street were instantly on our back porch, garbed in quickly donned bathrobes, for it was late at night. "What can we do?" Throughout these past few weeks, so many of you sent notes and made calls: "What can we do? How can we be there for you and Dan?" Thanksgiving came early for us this year. Our hearts open to you with gratitude as your hearts open to us.

Here we are, wondrously gathered. How is it that we convene in worshipful community? How do we part, still in worshipful community? Recall that worship is not necessarily a transitive verb. That is, it doesn't need a direct object—to worship God, to worship Allah, to worship a child, to worship a friend, to worship nature, to worship whatever. Worship can stand on its own! We can simply be in a state of worship, considering what matters most in our lives. Here we find a time to ponder, a time to be silent, a time to pray. Some of us pray "to a being;" others do not and may well find affinity with my friend and poet Fredrick Zydek, as he cited a cluster of folks at the Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, who are described by others in that congregation as "agnostics who pray."

Autumn calls me into a demeanor of wonder, silence, prayer, and contemplation that embraces a panoply of feelings. It directs me to notice details—the lone leaf fluttering from a branch, still cast in a garment of crimson, vacillating between holding on and letting go. In Zydek's voice,

"...The soul knows
 all too well what the trees mean
 each time a leaf lets go and makes
 the wind its temporary home."

It was the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 that called my late friend, Marietta Moskin, a longtime member of the Unitarian Church of All Souls New York City, to tend to different leaves.

Leaves—brown and gold
Rising upwards
From the tree outside the lead-paned church window

...I watch
And I think of the souls
Thousands of souls
So recently torn from what anchored them
To their earthly homes

...I watch the departing leaves
Through the lead-paned church window
As the sound of our hymn
Speeds them on their way
Knowing they will return in the Spring
And I raise my voice in song
For all the departed dead.

Such is the tree of life, a metaphor for another metaphor that is the interconnected web of all life. Both embody the intricacies with which we are bound and from which we depart.

Or do we depart? I'm not saying that death doesn't exist. I just don't know what happens, since to my knowledge I've not yet experienced it. But what each of us shares in our aloneness, our loneliness, and the community of this morning and the larger community of life are the realities that we were all born and we will all die. I refer to the latter as the great mystery, even the next great adventure.

Over these past weeks, I've changed heart about a core notion shared by so many—that we die alone. I'm not so sure about that. As I contemplate what might happen, I wonder. I wonder if when I move into that great mystery, when I flutter off this tree, and when those I love move likewise, if we are perhaps entering a great company of souls—billions of souls human and otherwise, who partake of community on a different level. Marietta spoke of “the thousands of souls.” William Ellery Channing spoke of “the great family of all souls.” Why not consider the beyond-our-imagination family of all who have ever lived and are now no longer with us in ways that we can fathom? Life beyond death? I don't know. But whatever happens, how could there not be a wondrous community, an autumnal communion, of all who have ever lived, in a form that evades our logic and escapes the confines of what we presumptuously call reason?

Here we are, back in this sanctuary, on this brilliant October morning. In the spaces of our contemplation, we wonder, we reflect, we fill with ponderings that perhaps surprise us and may not even be sensed by those surrounding us. Yet we are in the communion of others who share this state.

Unitarian Universalist—the adjective that we use to describe the faith that we share—contains its own paradox of the individual and the community, solitude and communion. While Unitarian initially meant the oneness of God, for many it now means the oneness of the sacred. While Universalism initially meant that a loving God would admit all to a blissful afterlife, for many it now means the interconnected web of all life. Whatever it might mean for you or me, consider that it holds a paradox of who we are and what we're about. Even if we know nothing about Unitarian Universalism, we participate in this paradox.

Communing in solitude resonates with transformation, transformation that moves in a dance, a back-and-forthness between holding on and letting go, between life and mystery, between colors that blaze forth from branches in the fullness of autumnal regalia and leaves and shapes that one by one move into the comforting blackness of earth, as we too move into that comforting blackness of earth and the transcendent space of the cosmic night.

Even in that cosmic night, no star shines alone, even as each casts its own light. So may we shine in blessed community with our distinctive fire.

Amen.

Sources:

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