

“Variation on a Theme”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
with Rev. Rick Klimowicz
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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“All aboard!” It’s the Hogwarts Express, and it’s eleven o’clock, which indeed it is in time as we mark it. Harry Potter and his soon to be best friend Ron and a bevy of other young travellers, wizards all, have made it.

“A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people... Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been,” the barrier through which he had taken an outrageous leap of faith, “with the words *Platform Nine and Three-Quarters*.”

“Not to worry,” he’d been told... “All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don’t stop and don’t be scared you’ll crash into it, that’s very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you’re nervous.” Harry leapt. He made it. All were aboard.

A crack in space, invisible to most. Crossing a barrier that defies appearances. A crack in time breaking into timelessness.

Things are never what they seem;
appearances are shallow.
What is real is what you dream,
when morning’s e’en is known as hallow.

Saints are prayed for one day later.
Never mind that they’re so few.
Boundaries break, when prayers are made for
all souls simply passing through.

This three-day sequence of legend, and many would say superstition, concludes with a prayer for all souls, which ultimately are *all souls* who cross the barrier into the great mystery. In the northern hemisphere autumn chills our bones. Cloud-shadows glaze the moon. Light is less. In the haunting lyrics of Theodore Roethke,

“The blood slows trance like in the altered vein;
our vernal wisdom moves from ripe to sere.”

A distinctive universalism—*all souls*—blends with mystery and awe, an undertow of fear and a boldness of breaking through boundaries that common sense renders invincible. It becomes apparent why so many of our congregations are named All Souls—All Souls, New London; All Souls, Brattleboro; All Souls, Tulsa; All Souls, Washington, DC; All Souls, New York City; and more.

“I am a *living* member of the great family of all souls,…” proclaimed the 19th century Unitarian preacher and theologian William Ellery Channing, in the spirit of universalism.

Who we are and what we’re about is connectedness, intimately and ultimately.

Whenever I ask members and friends of this congregation or any congregation with which I’ve connected what keeps you coming and what brought you here, at the heart of responses is *community*. In heart and mind, we yearn for connection that goes deeper than that for which we simply won’t settle. Through community that embraces all souls and connectedness that crosses boundaries conventional and at the outer edge, we enter the realm of the sacred. When we shed our masks, when we move into layers of gathering with no need for masks, we enter the realm of the sacred. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it beloved community. Beloved community can happen in our midst. One of the most profound ways to bring it about is through the ministry of small groups structured in ways that invite intimacy and ultimacy, while deepening our connectedness with that expanded group recognized by Channing as “the great family of all souls.”

Small Group Ministry is the intentional and recurring gathering of clusters of eight to ten individuals led by trained facilitators supported by a coordinating team. Its purpose is to foster friendship and caring, to enhance spiritual growth, to strength the fabric of our faith community, and to provide avenues for service within and beyond this congregation.

Rick, as a seasoned Small Group Ministry facilitator and part of the Coordinating Team, how do you see intimacy and ultimacy as core to the dynamic of this ministry of small groups?

[Rick responds – no text available, but he explains that intimacy happens as trust builds and group members bond and that ultimacy happens through the trustful dialogue around topics sometimes ultimate in nature—such as why we are here, the interconnected web, love, justice, birth, and death.]

Humans have been gathering in small groups since the dawn of humankind. We are relational by nature. This faith is grounded in an understanding that this is so. We’re covenantal, not creedal. We’re relational beyond what we think and believe. It’s not always easy, which is why intentional covenanting drives healthy and functional congregations and grounds the small groups that comprise them.

Rick, perhaps you would explain how this works…

[Rick responds – no text available, but he describes the behavioral covenant presented by facilitators as a template, which the group customizes though retaining the core items.]

I’m wondering how groups avoid becoming cliquish. What kind of practices prevent this? Rick, would you speak to this?

[Rick responds – no text available, but he explains the that if a group is fewer than ten in number, newcomers are welcome and that group composition is commonly changed from year to year.]

How Small Group Ministry works is familiar to some of you. Some of you have experienced it last year and in previous years and in other congregations. Many of you have not. One of the challenges is to flex sufficiently in our cultural habits to accommodate the structure that allows Small Group Ministry to work.

There's a paradox here, a paradox that is can be especially challenging for smaller congregations to digest. Robert Wuthnow, seasoned researcher of the so-called small group movement, names it:

“...the informality of small groups depends on having formal structure, and the formal structure is tolerated only because of the informality it encourages.”

Why would this reality be especially challenging for small congregations, such as ours currently is? Robert Hill, whose *complete guide to small group ministry* is exactly that, doesn't mince words.

“Churches, as they get larger, have to move toward more formal organization to function well. Resistance to increased formality is common all along the path from small to large church sizes, but it is particularly strong in some of our smaller, we're-like-a-family congregations.”

Hill says more:

“Families have implicit, unspoken rules and structures that are not readily obvious to individuals who are not already members. The more formal structure of Small Group Ministry, by contrast, offers explicit rules available to everyone, newcomer and long-timer alike. Explicit rules, being accessible to all, are inclusive and democratic.”

The “rules” to which Hill refers include the structural sequence of all Small Group Ministry sessions and the items included in a behavioral covenant.

Rick, perhaps you could explain this...

[Rick responds – no text available, but he explains that the structural sequence permits a continuity of expectation, while the content varies from session to session and further explains that the second session for a group beginning to meet always hones in on the Behavioral Covenant.]

If we are to behave as universalists with a small and large “u”, we practice inclusiveness. This means being intentional about honoring a covenant of mutual caring and respect, which also bids us to love alike without necessarily thinking alike.

We are, we already are, members of “the great family of all souls.” We are, we already are, woven with all who have gone before us, all with whom we inhabit this world in this slice of history that is now and all who will follow us. Commonly it takes leaps of faith, whether from a Platform 9 ¾ or trying a form of ministry that may be brand new to us, to satisfy the deep-down yearning for intimacy and ultimacy and connectedness that leans into beloved community. I hope you will take such a leap by staying after coffee hour and experiencing a one-hour abbreviated Small Group Ministry session that will perhaps whet your appetite and awaken your readiness for more.

My friend, colleague, and Unitarian Universalist theologian, scholar, and minister, Thandeka, asks why Small Group Ministry “is transforming our religious movement” and why “so many participants feel new joy and fulfillment and discover new meaning in their lives when they follow the simple, covenantal procedures for practicing right relationship in these small group settings.” She recounts an especially vivid experience.

“Several years ago I spent an evening discussing Small Group Ministry with members of a New England church who were interested in starting a covenant group program. [Small Group Ministry is often referred to as Covenant Groups.] He had wanted something like this for years, he said, because he was lonely. “I do not have any friends,” he finally confessed. Waves of shock rolled through the gathering. How could *he* be lonely? He was a revered and beloved member of the congregation, a pillar of the church. Many people expressed disbelief.

When the group quieted down, the man spoke again, saying, ‘Every man in this room who is my age knows what I am talking about. Our social upbringing has taught us not to talk about our feelings. We are not supposed to be emotionally vulnerable or close to anyone except our wives.’

As I listened to him, something changed. I could hear his heart beating. I could hear my heart beating. I could hear other hearts beating in the room.

At that moment, we were all one heart and thus all of one breath. One deep, long, loving breath infused each heart with new life...

And at that moment, I learned why [Small Group Ministry is] transforming our Unitarian Universalist movement today. [It is a ministry] for the heart.”

May it be so, and Amen.

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