



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Self, Confidence and Community,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 12, 2013

“We are all longing to go home,” Starhawk says, “to some place we have never been--a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.” She’s talking about community: “A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.”¹

We are all longing to go home. Or are we? If what we really want is community and connection, then how come community engagement is the decline? A decade ago, Robert Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone*. He observed that more Americans were bowling than ever before, but participation in bowling leagues had plummeted. Americans were bowling alone. Indicators of what Putnam called “social capital” were steadily declining. Over 25 years, attendance at civic meetings had decreased 58%, families were having dinner together 48% less often, people were inviting friends over 35% less.

Some reasons for this are people working longer hours and commuting more, and the influence of television and the internet. We’re too tired and too busy to attend city council meetings, or be part of service clubs or the PTA, even though doing these things is good for us and our society.

And I’m preaching to the choir here. Because if you attend church regularly, you’re more likely to be involved in other civic efforts too. These connections tend to feed one another. But if you’re isolated, it gets harder to make those connections. It’s like what Yogi Berra once said, “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”

I wonder about these things, because I believe in the power of community. For years I’ve thought the problem was the growing individualism in our society. I thought we needed less emphasis on the individual and more on the community. But I read something recently that completely changed how I think about this. It’s an essay by my friend and colleague, the Rev. Tom Schade, until recently the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Worcester. Tom is a bright guy and a clear thinker. His essay, called “United or Untied,” begins by describing the contemporary landscape:

“Yes, indeed there is a deep hunger for community these days,” he writes.

¹ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*.

“Which is why churches, religious institutions of all kinds, civic organizations, like Rotary and Kiwanis, organized political parties, bowling leagues, and neighborhood organizations, PTA’s are all busting at the seams, growing by leaps and bounds.

“But they are not. Everyone wants community, and yet more and more people are leading very privatized lives, with fewer and fewer community outlets every year.

“A similar fact is that people say that they want to be in a romantic love relationship, (but there are more single people than ever before.) Apparently, we want to be in love, just not with any of the people we know. We want to be a part of a community, just not the ones around us...”

Do you see the contradiction that I am getting at? We want to live United, but seem to be choosing to live Untied?”²

Tom goes on to look at why we are adverse to joining, why more of us are bowling alone. He acknowledges there is an inherent risk in committing; you just don’t know--that person who asks you out on a date could be a stalker; that church could be a cult. There is something, isn’t there, within each of us that cause us to hold back? And to some extent, this is healthy. “Look before you leap,” the saying goes.

The conventional wisdom, and what I have thought for years, is that our culture has tilted too much towards the individual and away from community, that people now prefer shallow, disposable relationships over committed ones.

Here comes the point where Tom Schade blows my mind. He doesn’t agree with the conventional wisdom that we are lazy people afraid of commitment, living in an increasingly self-centered society. No! He says, “I believe that the obstacle to community is not too much individualism, but not enough. And when I say that, I am standing squarely in the religious tradition of liberal religion, which is different than almost every other religious tradition the world has ever seen.”

Tom says it’s pretty easy to commit to a Sunday morning soccer league. It’s a time-limited commitment that probably isn’t going to change your life. But church--we actually think that living a life of connection and caring, a life that calls you into relationship with your own longings, and with other people, with the depth and height of life--we think this might actually change you, might even transform you.

When I walked with my wife into the UU church in Portsmouth twenty years ago, I had no idea what that church was going to stir up in me. I wasn’t looking to become a minister!

Tom says some people fear commitment because they don’t know how to manage it. In a church, he says, people fear “they will be asked for money all the time, and they will not know how to say no. They will be asked to volunteer their time and they will not know how to say, ‘sorry, too busy.’ They will lose their own judgment to the attractions of a charismatic leader. Join the church and next thing you know, you’re in Jonestown.”

² Tom Schade, “United or Untied,” blog post on April 12, 3013, available at <http://www.tomschade.com/2013/04/united-or-untied.html>

This is caused by “is a lack of self-possession, a lack of confidence in the self to say ‘yes’ and to say ‘no,’ to manage one’s own life. It is a fear of losing yourself, instead of having the confidence to possess your self.”

Tom says, “almost every religious tradition in the world takes a highly suspicious view of the self. Conquer the self. Diminish the self. Overcome the self. Ignore the self. Submit the self to the church, to the religious order, to God.” But, he reminds us, “liberal religion understands that it is only the free mind, the mind in possession of itself that can make real and enthusiastic and powerful commitments. We have confidence in you--that you have within you the strength to make such a commitment.”

Speaking of commitment, if you haven’t already, now is the time to make your pledge of financial support to the church. We need you, and we need your support. It’s that simple. If you haven’t already, will you take a pledge card and fill it out today? We need your help, if we are going to be the strong and healthy and vital congregation we want to be.

But this isn’t a stewardship sermon--it’s not about the church, it’s about you. About being in touch with who you are; about having the confidence in your self, so you can say yes to what you truly desire. A turning point in my own vocational discernment came when I realized I wasn’t trading in my old self for a newer model--I was becoming more fully who I was born to be.

That’s what I mean when I say the church is a community of liberation and transformation. A place where you are invited to become yourself, without shame or fear. Not to lose yourself, but to find yourself.

Any community, the church included, has its issues. Our reading this morning, from Wendell Berry’s novel, paints such a beautiful picture of community, with all its imperfections:

“What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on.... It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill.”³

Healthy individualism is not selfishness. It is only as healthy, self-possessed individuals, that we can join into commitments with one another. If you want to get into a love relationship, you need to know where you end, and where the other person begins. If you want to be a good parent, you need to understand that your child is a person in their own right, not a miniature you.

On this day when we remember and honor mothers, can we acknowledge the commitment required of every mother? You moms, there must have been moments when you thought, “If I

³ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*.

knew what I was getting myself into..." If nothing else, parenting teaches us about what we can't foresee or control.

When I was about to become a father, I must have been nervous about this, that I would screw it up. Because one day, asked by a friend about the impending birth, I made a terrible joke. I said, "Well, when I make my first big mistake, we'll just take the baby back and exchange it for a new model."

Early on, our son Will taught me a lesson. When he was three months old, he was diagnosed with a skull condition--his head was becoming more and more misshapen because the soft spot on his head had already closed up. So when he was four months old, we were at Children's Hospital in Boston; Will getting big pieces of his skull removed, and a scar across his sweet little head, from one ear to the other. And we were lucky--Will's roommate was a ten year-old girl named LeAnne, who had a brain tumor. We kept in touch after leaving the hospital, visiting LeAnne and her mom in Quincy. Less than a year later, we went back again, for LeAnne's funeral. From all this I learned a lesson about parenting--a lesson that some of you know from your own more difficult experiences--that things happen beyond our control, and sometimes all we can do is hold on to those we love, and do the best we can, and love as fully as we are able.

Making a commitment--to a partner or a child or a church--doesn't mean you won't ever be disappointed or get your heart broken. It just means that you won't be alone, in your sorrow or in your joy. You'll have companions, and, I dare say, blessings along the way.

We are longing, aren't we, to go home? To places that welcome us as we are, places that help us to live more fully into who we were born to be. We need community, of this kind, don't we?

Our liberal religious tradition, Tom Schade reminds us, "understands that it is only the free mind, the mind in possession of itself that can make real and enthusiastic and powerful commitments. We have confidence in you--that you have within you the strength to make such a commitment."

We have confidence in you--that you already have within yourself what you need. That you don't come into this world defective or deficient; but rather, as Wordsworth said, "trailing clouds of glory." That each of us is born with what Matthew Fox calls "original blessing."

This community is not one where you have to give up your individuality or your beliefs or your heritage. No, our image of community is like a tapestry woven from a diversity of threads, that is stronger and more beautiful than any homogeneous piece of cloth. This is meant to be a place where you uncover your light and let it shine.

We have confidence in you. My hope and my prayer is that you have confidence in, and love and respect for, your self. Your beautiful and beloved self.

And here we are, together. How can we keep from singing?

Amen.