

# Called to Community

December 30, 2007

Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church, Harvard MA

A light snow was falling and the streets were crowded with people. It was Munich in Nazi Germany. Sussie, a German Jew, had been riding a city bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

Sussie watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why.

“I don’t have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They’re going to take me.”

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid [idiot],” he roared, “I can’t stand being near you!” The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. “Damn her,” the man shouted angrily. “My wife has forgotten her papers again! I’m so fed up. She always does this!”

The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw him again. She never even knew his name.<sup>1</sup>

I love this familiar kind of story and I love how, in the blink of a moment, a quick-thinking and compassionate person can literally save the life of a “stranger on the bus,” the title of this story as told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, my Judaism professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. This story so powerfully embodies the principle of which he spoke in his poem “Messengers of the Most High,” our reading this morning.

We all hold the potential to be messengers from the Most High to each other. Sometimes we can even save a life when we have the courage and presence of spirit to act on that potential; to live into our call to community.

As Unitarian Universalists, we know this. We are called together not by a common creed but by covenant, our familiar mutual promises to and with each other. We covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and

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<sup>1</sup> Kushner, Lawrence, “Stranger on the Bus,” in *Invisible Lines of Connection, Sacred Stories of the Ordinary*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2004, (81).

compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.<sup>2</sup>

By definition, Unitarian Universalists cannot be who we are standing alone, in isolation. We need each other in order to practice our faith, even as individuals. While we may engage our spirituality as individuals, the basis of that spirituality is formed in our coming together in the very first place. As Reverend Dana Greeley, a former senior minister at the Arlington Street Church in Boston, and the first president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, noted,

There is a stage in human development when people begin to be as much interested in others as in themselves, as much concerned with others' lots as their own. When this stage of development is reached, by some miraculous transition, the word 'we,' expressive of sympathy and of the sense of togetherness in life, takes the place of the word 'I.' The word 'we' unites us....I without my relationships am nothing: the people I love, the people I serve, the people who work with me and with whom I work. So *we* are much more important than *I* am.<sup>3</sup>

The "we" that is our religious community is not just a higher stage of human development, though. It is the very means by which we live our faith and by which we are able to transform ourselves, those around us, and our very world. And this transformation is just what we covenant to promote and affirm in the principles that bind us to one another.

As Reverend Wendy said in her recent sermon here on anti-racism, the important work that we do as Unitarian Universalists begins with relationship. And relationship is the foundation of community, be it congregational, societal, or cultural. As Reverend Wendy explained, to be in relationship we must not only understand what issues are important to another community, but we also must be willing to take the time and make the effort to stand up on behalf of that community.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adopted as a bylaw by the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies, excerpts.

<sup>3</sup> Greeley, Dana, "First Person Plural," in *Forward Through The Ages*, First Parish in Concord, Concord, MA 1986, (20).

<sup>4</sup> Why This Work, sermon delivered October 28, 2007.

One community that has become a passion of mine since my time in seminary is that of those who are institutionalized, be they mentally ill, incarcerated or otherwise restrained from fully actualizing their inherent worth and dignity. One of the most effective ways that Unitarian Universalists tend to this community is through the prison ministries of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, a worldwide church without walls or borders whose central office is located in Boston.

My ministerial internship is split between Arlington Street Church and the Church of the Larger Fellowship, or as we affectionately call it, CLF. Church of the Larger Fellowship is the largest congregation in our movement, serving over 2,800 Unitarian Universalist members, most of whom are geographically remote or otherwise unable to belong to brick and mortar congregations. Although many of our members are people just like you – and in fact I know that some of you here this morning are CLF members many of our members are international or elderly, homebound or immobile, impoverished or otherwise unable to comport to the standards of behavior that we seek to honor in our congregational life.

More than 10% of our membership is incarcerated. The Church of the Larger Fellowship has in fact a vibrant, growing, and life-sustaining prison ministry. We minister to Unitarian Universalists whose only connection to our movement and our faith community is through Unitarian Universalist pen pals or by the correspondence courses that we offer them.

The CLF offers correspondence courses for our prisoner members. One of the prisoner students in my Spirit of Life Adult Religious Education course has described community – his prison community – in these compelling terms:

Different ages, cultures, races, and religions are thrown together in overcrowded conditions. In a community situation like this, though, we're stuck with each other. This is the difficulty and the richness of it.

It's like putting a handful of jagged-edged stones into a gem tumbler and turning on the machine. The tumbling may break and shatter the stones, but after sufficient tumbling, the stones emerge polished and sparkling – free of their rough edges. We have to realize, however, that stones become precious gems by rubbing up against one another in an intense environment. Ultimately, we see that it's all a play of Consciousness which is transforming us from rough, jagged-edged stones to polished, sparkling gems.

All differences, whether physical, mental, or emotional, are superficial. They are like waves on the surface of the ocean. Deep within we share the same inner

depths. Beneath the ever-changing waves, we are the same, we remain the same unchanging One.<sup>5</sup>

I cannot imagine a more articulate exposition of community than the words and experience of this man. He is one of us and we are of him. Across the miles and through the thick walls, electrified barbed wire, and armed guard towers, we are community. We are bound together by our shared Unitarian Universalist covenant and by relationship that calls us to take the time and to stand up on his behalf because it is our behalf as well.

This is what CLF exists to do: to create and nourish community across every sort of barrier, obstacle, and frontier imaginable. While many of the folks who benefit from the Church of the Larger Fellowship are already Unitarian Universalists, a significant number of those whom we reach are new to or even unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism. Yet even without the immediate comraderie and friendships that often come from joining a brick and mortar congregation, the folks who come to us through CLF also experience that sudden and satisfying spiritual sense of having come home again, maybe even for the very first time.

Just as Unitarian Universalism can and has provided us with the means to save ourselves and each other, so the work of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, even in the absence of the face-to-face encounters, provides lifelines to those we encounter around our world and in our own backyards. The importance of the lifelines that can come through real community was recently underscored by an article in the New York Times entitled “Gay Enclaves Face Prospect of Being Passe.”<sup>6</sup> There the reporter discussed how recent cultural trends have displaced “historic gay villages” in America’s largest cities, even as the overall population of the United States is becoming even more urbanized.

The effect of these demographic changes have left many gay and lesbian folks closer to the places of their births and in less large regional cities, but often at the cost of the connections, stability, and safety that come from being part of a greater community of affinity. The isolation and loneliness that has arisen – “a waning sense of belonging” - has led some therapists to encourage their patients to go back to gay and lesbian bars so that they can experience the interactions and friendships that were once a normal component of gay enclaves in major U.S. cities.

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous prisoner response to Spirit of Life Course, Lesson One.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/30/us/30gay.html>.

Several researchers interviewed for the article discussed how the growth and evolution of any community necessarily lessens the importance of place – that physical location matters when a community is new or young or just beginning to grow. Looking at it historically, we Unitarian Universalists are a new and young faith community. Yet, because of our numbers, other than here in New England, physical location has served to create a sense of isolation, of being alone, or not having any sense of belonging.

CLF provides that sense of belonging. To spiritual seekers in dogmatic places, the socially outcast or unfit, those without transportation, those who are geographically isolated, young adults leaving their home churches for the very first time, or those who are far from home for any number of reasons.

You, too, can be a part of that sense of belonging, to provide a keystone in the foundation of that community, to be a messenger from the most high or that stranger on the bus. Join the Church of the Larger Fellowship or provide us financial support or become a pen pal to a CLF member who is incarcerated.

CLF membership is not simply an altruistic pursuit – there are many, many meaningful benefits available to Church of the Larger Fellowship members, from our highest quality monthly publication, *Quest*, which publishes sermons and reflections from the most accomplished professionals of our movement; to our ever-growing and up-to-date website; to the young adult membership organization that we sponsor, the Church of the Younger Fellowship, which strives to keep and deeply grow our young adult members as they leave for college, the military, and the newest chapter in their lives.

My beloved Unitarian Universalist seekers and sharers, in Rabbi Kushner's terms, you have the pieces to someone else's puzzle. **You** are the piece to someone else's puzzle. CLF provides the flat, dry surface on which we Unitarian Universalists can assemble our myriad puzzle pieces into the picture that contains each and every piece of the puzzle – to form a sustaining community, a complete picture where each piece matters and every piece is necessary to complete the picture. We here this morning, and Unitarian Universalists meeting in churches, social halls, school cafeterias, and living rooms across the planet this morning, are all pieces of that puzzle. Without each piece the picture is unrecognizable, without every piece the picture is incomplete. Without each other, we are incomplete.

“Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else’s puzzle. Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don’t.” Well, we *do* know it. And we are called to act upon that knowledge, to answer ‘yes’ to the call to community.

May it be so and amen.