

Absolutely agnostic: Holding Contradictory Views in Community

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

(I love this title...I chose it because it implies that agnostics are absolutely sure of where they stand...how DO we hold contradictory views in community? I find it strange that UU's come into our congregations with a set theological identity or philosophic perspective, and rarely evolve from that position. Isn't that contrary to our intention to be open and to seek wisdom from many sources? These are just some of the things on my mind this morning)

What is our great work as a congregation? What is our great work as Unitarian Universalists?

My call to ministry is a call to our great work. For me it is the great work of love and justice. The great work of transformation- transformation from small love and small steps toward justice- to big steps to giant steps, transformation to something worthy, something big enough to spend my life on...something I might even die for.

Why do we spend our love, our money, our energy, and our time, here at 100 Welsh Park Drive. Not for the glory of God, not for the promise of heaven, not for the joy of meetings, not only for the sake of our children...no we are here for the great work.

Discerning our great work is a challenge. There's no one to tell us what to do...and don't we love that.

There's no one to tell us if we're on the right path...sometimes we wish there were. There's no one to tell us how to fix our mistakes...how to live more fully into our principles, how to attract new members, how to get along better with one another....as Annie Dillard says...there's no one but us.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, not in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead, as if innocence had ever been-

and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.

God, I love Annie Dillard. I love finding wise voices to guide my thinking, to hold my doubts and fears and still release me into my best dreams...into a place of sacred confidence.

Isn't this our ministry to one another – to be wise voices for each other...to think things through together, to listen to each others doubts and fears...and together still to dream our best dreams...and embrace the sacred within?

Dillard is telling us that with all our faults, all our past mistakes, all our very human- can I say it, "sins"; though we're not ready, though we're tired, though we don't know what we're doing...there is no one but us...there never has been.

What? There never has been? This uphill struggle we live inch by inch, mile by slow mile, toward love and justice has always been in the hands of limited human beings like us?

Wow, that's comforting, sort of. It means we can't wait for a hero or a savior or the right set of by-laws, or the right moment...we've got to go with what we've got..."us"...no one but us.

Ok, so here we are....yearning together for something greater than ourselves. Yearning together for transformation to our best selves. Yearning together to be a congregation of honesty and authenticity. Yearning to create healthy and safe space. Yearning to be morally courageous, to discern and pursue our great work...our intended ministry.

Yearning to make a real difference in the world outside these lovely walls. What struggles should we be leading in Rockville, Gaithersburg, Germantown, Potomac?

In this narcissistic age we yearn to put aside our radical individualism and embrace our full capacity for relationships of integrity. We yearn to relate to other congregations and faith-based organizations.

We at UUCR take pride in being a friendly and welcoming congregation. And we are...but...is this our great work? Is friendly community our great work? I believe when we talk about church as community we don't go deep enough...we don't take it to the spiritual and transformative level...we don't get beyond ourselves.

Some of you remember the work of M. Scott Peck and his work on community building. Peck made a great claim, he wrote: "In and through community lies the salvation of the world"

Perhaps our great work is nothing less than salvation of the world...perhaps how we build and live in community will contribute to that salvation. Part of that work certainly includes leaving a healthy vital church for our grandchildren. Part of the work certainly includes work for peace and justice...feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, creating works of art and places of harmony, telling the truth, and giving away our possessions.

We cannot do this saving work alone...we need the power of religious community , the power and resources of religious commitment. So we must build a strong and loving congregation.

In his book, "The Different Drum" Peck describes community as "a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together and to delight in each other and make each others' conditions their own."

Peck's description of community is very apt for congregations.

And it is interesting that he called his book a different drum...I'm not sure how he was using that phrase...but it certainly resonates with UUs. How many of us consider ourselves marching to a different drum. How many of us take pride in our difference.

I was going to speak today about our different religious and not-so-religious perspectives and the crazy dynamics of all marching to a different drum...different drums of beliefs and meanings....different drums of memories and expectations of worship services...different drums of what justice issue matters most...different drums of how much to tithe or pledge, different drums of what a minister should talk about , or do for them.

Following these different drummers, we sometimes end up in different corners of the room...looking around rather suspiciously.

To create and sustain a community that can help save and heal the world...we have to share our different drumbeats...our different meanings and expectations. Too often we keep quiet

about our beliefs ...about what matters to us most...for fear of upsetting the comfort of our friendly community.

We also err, when we exaggerate our differences...or define one another only by those perceived differences. We quietly categorize someone as humanist, or Christian, or pagan, or gay or African American or a founding member or someone with kids in RE, or a choir person...and with these labels, we write them off...we think we know where they stand...we close the door to further communication or to a full embrace of the amazing possibilities of pluralism.

UU's have always been a bit ahead of the culture, but the culture is getting ahead of us. WE are in danger of losing our uniqueness as the only place of theological diversity...there are interfaith organizations all around us...and we are getting left behind...we are using old languages and assumptions.

Theologian, Diana Eck, of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, says we now live in a multi-religious society, she distinguishes between inclusion, exclusion and pluralism. Inclusion is often the stance UU congregations take, "everyone is welcome"...but often the underlying assumption is that the new person is welcome because they are or will soon become one of us...just like us.

Pluralism allows for difference to be maintained. As Eck says there must be energetic engagement with diversity...more than just counting how many of this, how many of that. Those who come don't just fit in...their very presence effects change in the community. We need to be actively seeking understanding and holding our deepest differences in relationship.

In healthy community as in a healthy family or any healthy relationship there is a place made for conflict...for disagreement, for difference.

Going beyond inclusion to pluralism may well create conflict.

As family systems teaches we must both differentiate and stay connected. Know who we are, and actively engage with others.

And yes, there may well be conflict.

And as in true in life...we learn from conflict. Parker Palmer, sociology professor at Georgetown and teacher at Pendle Hill Quaker community suggests that we think of church as "a school of the spirit". A place where Love is always drawing us out into the larger life. He suggests that our idealized images of community fail us because they project upon the community needs for personal nurture and support beyond which can be met.

This, I think, is sometimes a dynamic here at UUCR...that we hope and expect an idealized community that will meet all of our personal needs for nurture and support. Or that the congregation will see that our issues and agendas are the most valid. Whether it's a desire for personal needs to be met or for our particular set of congregational goals and ideas to be implemented...

whether it's joys and sorrows, or social justice issues, or art to be displayed, or canvass information to be shared, or needs of the youth, or the preference for classical music...whether is time in the service, or space in Quest, or first page of the website, or tables in the corridor...it is easy to be disappointed...easy to feel that the community of UUCR is not meeting a particular set of expectations.

When the chaos or conflict of these failed images of what the church community should be take hold on the culture of the church...then we have failed in our ministry to one another...we have failed to understand congregational life as a school of the spirit.

And we lose the capacity to be a force for salvation of the world. We become an island, we become selfish and unhealthy. We isolate ourselves from the larger life, from the public sphere.

M. Scott Peck characterizes four stages of community building:

First is pseudo-community...the state of "being nice". A state of politeness, conflict avoidance and denial of important differences. We act nice because of anxiety or fear of disagreement. We need to resist the pull of anxiety and fear. Fortunately, pseudo-community eventually breaks down and we are thrown into the second stage:

Chaos- in this stage individual differences are aired, and the group tries to overcome them through misguided attempts to heal or convert. We respond to the loudest voice and we try to fix it. Listening suffers, and emotions and frustration run high...we must resist the urge to fix...the urge to cut off debate. According to Peck, there are two ways out of chaos: retreat into pseudo-community (often achieved through a quick organizational fix) or moving forward to the next stage:

Emptiness-(He means this is a positive way...as letting go) this is a process of release- recognizing and naming barriers (expectations, prejudices, the need to control) that hold us back from authentic communication...and preventing us from being emotionally available to hear the voices of others. This is a period of going within, or inner searching and sharing our truths with others. It is a process of "dying to the self" and can make way for something remarkable to emerge:

Community- in this stage, individuals accept others as they are, and are themselves accepted. Differences are no longer feared or ignored or stereotyped, but rather celebrated. A deep sense of peace and joy characterizes the group.

In Pecks' construct communities move through and around these stages...it's not a linear progression to true community...but a circle that is on-going...through the life of the community.

Certainly UUCR has been at different stages at different times in its' history. I think we have the potential at this time to move to true community...but we need to be less nice and less conflict avoiding...we need to practice a little more of going within...and allowing ourselves to learn from this school of the spirit.

We need to make each other's condition our own...to really listen and connect, not to persuade, but to honor and learn from each other.

There is no one but us...but we can do this...we can do this great work to which we are called as a congregation...we can be among those communities who bring salvation and healing to the world.

We need to create true community, not for our comfort, but so we can take our liberal religious power and put it to work in larger ways.

I invited the elephant here today...to remind us of our unity...whatever our different truths...our different perspectives we are one elephant...UUCR, one elephant...but we can't approach our unity, our identity with blindfolds on...we must see and share our differences...not to dwell on them, but to affirm them honestly...we must risk the deep learning of the spirit...returning to the yearnings we share...and understanding our identity as being part of the sacred in life...we can learn to see the sacred immanence of human/god/love spirit as our common source and strength.

To further our creation of community, we will be forming a lay ministry circle, training more among us in the history and theological and application of our common purposes.

If Love Universal is our common source and strength then we must struggle to make each other's condition our own. To live in community for the sake of others...not for our own needs alone, but to discern the common need, not for myself alone, but for the good of the whole.

"May this church be healed and made whole, not by its friendliness, but by its character- may Love be the spirit of this church." WE are called to nothing less.

Amen/Blessed Be

READING Jan. 11

From Parker Palmer

The role community can play in our lives is to draw us out into the common life.

If the church could become such a community, a place where people confront the stranger in each other and in themselves, and still know they are members one of another-it would help people enter the public sphere.

But critics have long claimed that the typical congregation contains no strangeness, that it is a bland and homogeneous blend.

Deeper probes reveal that the congregations' uniformity is only apparent, maintained for the sake of image. Behind the façade of the typical white middle-class congregation there lurks considerable variety in taste, opinion, viewpoint, conviction, world view. But that variety has been suppressed for a fiction, the illusion that the church must be a family, avoiding conflict at all costs.

It is a costly illusion.