

Building the Architecture of Our Interdependence
A Sermon Offered to the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church
May 10, 2015
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READINGS:

Unitarian Universalist Multisite: Our Theological Grounding
(<http://uumultisite.weebly.com/theological-grounding.html>)

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that the sacred and the power of grace arise from the interdependent web of which we all are a part. As we build deeper connections and break down the walls between us, a powerful and holy creativity arises that enables us to transform the world and each other. This theology of interconnection and covenant is articulated simply and powerfully in our Christian heritage ("Wherever two or three are gathered, there am I...") and is found in Jewish sources such as Martin Buber's theology of "I-Thou." We affirm it when we explain that "religion" is best understood through its Latin root ("re-ligio") which means, "to bind together." UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman systematized it in his "theology of creative interchange." Multisite is about our congregational systems finally catching up with our theology. Congregations sharing mission, ministries and staff heal the spiritual and organizational disconnection that has too long come between us.

Our forbearers left us with a vision of interconnected congregations in the Cambridge Platform. While we often focus on its emphasis on congregational independence, its hope rested equally on what it called "the communion of churches." Congregational polity calls us to protect each congregation's right to govern itself, but its power is found in congregations covenanting with each other in mutual support. Multisite is one of the most intimate forms of congregational covenant. It seeks to tap into the transformative power found not only within our congregations but also between our congregations.

"Love Your Neighbor; An Inspiring Story About Two Friends", by Frank Fredericks. Posted on Huffington Post 11/14/13.
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-fredericks/love-your-neighbor-inspiring-story-of-two-friends_b_2127070.html)

As a Christian, I reflected over the years as what it means to "love your neighbor." When I lived in rural America, outside of Portland, Ore., this seemed like a much easier feat. Our nearest neighbor lived a few hundred yards away. I'd have to walk a mile in any direction to find someone we didn't know.

Now I live in New York City, and my "neighbor" is someone I don't know. My city, neighborhood and block are filled people who don't know me, don't care to know me, don't look like me, talk like me, smell like me, think like me, and have no desire to

change that fact. This is true to the extent that I haven't yet caught the names of the couple who are subletting the apartment next to ours. In short, I literally don't even know my literal neighbors. I find that it's pretty hard to love people you don't even know. And sometimes, we all, myself included, use that as an excuse to not even try.

One day, Brendan, a young but rising DJ in New York, was coming home to his Brooklyn apartment when a homeless woman asked him for money. He said, honestly, that he had no money. By the end of the week, she asked two more times, and each no he answered "no." Finally she frankly replied, "You better not, because every day you say no." Inserting some rational thinking into an otherwise awkward conversation, he proposed, "I am on my way to a job interview. If I get the job, I will take you out for Chinese food." This promise yielded a friendship that neither were prepared for -- that changed the trajectory of their lives, both forwards toward each other.

Brendan got the job. But their friendship didn't just end with Chinese food. They built a friendship of mutual support, spending their birthdays, holidays and tough times together, over a period of eight years. When Brendan's heater broke, she made him a blanket. Two days later when he told her that he had lost his job, she disappeared, returning minutes later, bringing him groceries, and which [she] continued to do throughout the winter. Even with so little, she never hesitated to give back.

Over these years, Jackie moved from the streets and subway stations, into a halfway house, YMCA, and is now moving into an apartment. To celebrate this occasion, Brendan wanted to do something special for Jackie. He went with her to Target, and helped her to pick out everything she'd need for an apartment, starting a registry. Then, he set up a campaign to raise the money to pay for the registry (now closed), along with an awesome video telling their story. While their original goal was to raise \$500, the campaign went viral and they've raised more than \$6,000, and are now looking to use the extra funding to support other women in need.

Brendan isn't a Christian, and this isn't about out-Jesusing each other. It's not even a challenge to only Christians, but everyone who struggles with the desire to be a stakeholder in their community, yet are overwhelmed by the reality of living out that desire.

I met Brendan from my music business days, through our work with Lady Gaga (him as her DJ, me as her manager), long before I got involved in non-profit work. Yet he reminds me that having a day-job with a mission doesn't relieve us of the challenge of being loving neighbors, for the few within miles, or the thousands within blocks. Similarly, loving our neighbors, whether next door or at our door-step, doesn't require a change in profession, just a willingness to speak, to listen and to give. May Brendan's story challenge us this week to step out of comfort zone, and find a new way to honor, serve and love the people around us.

I'd like to begin this morning with a quick poll. If you have ever been asked the question, "What do Unitarian Universalists believe?" would you please stand or raise your hand? Great. Now, when you were asked this question, how many of you had an answer? If you did, would you please remain standing, and/or keep your hand up?

The question is a hard one. Many of us have been asked it before. Few of us have been able to answer it.

Well, good friends and members of the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church, I come bearing good news. There is good reason we are vexed by this question. It is the wrong question to ask! As my good friend and colleague, Rev. Patrick McLaughlin of the Manchester, NH UU church says, "Asking what UU's believe will give you little to no insight into who we are because it is not our "beliefs" that unite us." What unites us is a desire to create a world that works for everyone with no one and no thing left out. What unites us is our commitment to work together to become the beloved community. What unites us is the fragile web of covenant, first spun by our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, later spun by those who envisioned, and then made manifest, a united Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. What unites us is the continuation of that web of covenant we weave with one another, with the wider Unitarian Universalist Association, and with the world community and all of creation.

Ask what Unitarian Universalists believe, and more likely than not you will get a blank stare. Ask us what binds us together and I hope you have a comfortable chair and a cold drink because what's going to follow will take a little time!

Now, a few weeks back we talked some about the voices that live in our heads and think they are the experts on everything. So here's a quick question for you. When I just suggested that UU's don't have a common belief, how many of you heard the voices in your head say, "That's not true! We have our principles and Sources! You know the 'inherent worth and dignity' thingy!"

While it's true that we have our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources **in common**, they are **not statements of belief**. Statements of belief begin with the words, "We believe". In the United Church of Christ, for example, we have a Statement of Faith that reads:

*We believe in You, O God, Eternal Spirit
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
And to Your deeds we testify; etc., etc., etc...* (From UCC Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology).

Statements of faith belief begin with the words, "We believe". Our Unitarian Universalist Principles begin with the words:

We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.

We **covenant to affirm and promote**. That's very different proclamation than **we believe**. In fact, if we believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person there would be no need to *covenant to affirm and promote it*. If we **believed** that *justice, equity and compassion* already existed *in human relations*, we probably wouldn't be working so hard to build the infrastructure for it. If we were delusional enough to assert that *acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations* was a done deal, why show up on Sunday mornings, or any other time for that matter? We **covenant to affirm and promote** *a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large; We covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all; We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part* because we **believe** these are worthy and important goals. And because we **believe** they are worthy and important goals, we work hard and devote a lot of time, talent and treasure to **affirm and promote them**. But that's a very different thing from a **belief in** these principles.

The New Creed proclaims:

*We believe in God:
Who has created and is creating,
Who has come in Jesus,
The Word made flesh.* (United Church of Canada, 1980)

The Apostles' Creed declares:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,(.)
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died and was buried; ...*

We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote... We are an association of congregations free from a codified statement of faith. But that doesn't free us from one another. Not having a common statement of faith doesn't mean we get to do or believe whatever we want to because what we do have is this precious, fragile, tender covenant that we share responsibility for. Not having a common statement of faith is not the same as having nothing in common...but it does make answering the question, "What do UU's believe," very difficult to answer!

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In the reading from the Multisite [Ministries] web page, which we read just a few minutes ago, the writer asserts two fundamental points;

- 1) That *Our forbearers left us with a vision of interconnected congregations, and;*
- 2) *Multisite is about our congregational systems finally catching up with our theology.*

Great. But, what exactly is Multisite and why should we care?

Well, as we spoke about two weeks ago, congregations in the mainstream have been challenged by a number of sociological transitions that have come about in this time of post-modernity. The “nones”, those who claim no religious affiliation when asked, constitute the largest growing denomination in North America right now and this is impacting church membership across denominations. The radical decline in incomes nationally has made it increasingly difficult for the members we have to give what they might like to, and our older, long-time supporters who were in a position to give generously are now on fixed incomes or dying. Add to all of this the increase in the number of kids who participate in traveling sports teams and the huge demands these place on family time, and the general observation that people just seem to be busier these days and, well, the future for the church, ours included, could look pretty bleak!

But wait! There’s hope!

Enter Multisite, a new way to create church vitality in the twenty-first century. Why are we focusing on creating church vitality instead of on how we can get more members? Because, vitality has to come first. People will not flock to a sinking ship. They will not want to join an organization that is struggling to keep its head above water.

But what if that same organization is vital and alive, pulsing with creativity and spirit? Well then, try keeping them out! What if that church has tapped *the sacred and the power of grace* is bubbling up *from the interdependent web of which we all are a part?* Who wouldn’t want to be a part of that? Now, imagine Unitarian Universalism as a movement, unleashing a *powerful and holy creativity... As we build deeper connections and break down the walls between us.* This is the stuff of real possibility *that could enable us to transform* ourselves and our world.

Where do we begin? Right here in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The theory behind Multisite is that *congregations shar[e] mission, ministries and staff.* We may not have enough youth here at PUUC to generate the energy a critical mass of kids would, but what might happen if we brought Keene’s youth group together with our own? Maybe right now we don’t have enough funding available to call a full-time

minister, but we could share our ministers between congregations. This would enable us to use the same sermons more than once and free up close to 20 hours per week to engage in other work of the church. And what about you? How might Multisite invigorate your faith journey? Well, for one thing you'd be enriched by the perspective of not just one but of a couple of ministers. And imagine, for one moment, being able to free ourselves from the never-ending work of fundraising. Not "fun-raising", because we do a lot of that here, raising money and a little of the roof and this work will always be necessary. But imagine a congregation with more time to devote to mission work, religious education for all ages, and *heal[ing] the spiritual and organizational disconnection that has too long come between us* and our neighboring congregations.

Now, imagine this. Imagine what it will mean in our homes, in our communities, in our State, Nation and World if Unitarian Universalists everywhere become master builders of the architecture of our interdependence. Think about this and think about the sheer volume of *mishagas* (Yiddish word meaning: unnecessary stuff that makes you nuts) that would literally fall away in the process of life itself if we, and our neighbors, and our leaders, could figure our way around the stuff we think needs to divide us.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that the sacred and the power of grace arise from the interdependent web of which we all are a part. As we build deeper connections and break down the walls between us, a powerful and holy creativity arises that enables us to transform the world and each other. As Frank Fredericks wrote in the story about an unexpected friendship we read at the outset of this sermon, ... this isn't about out-Jesusing each other. It's [certainly] not... a challenge to only Christians, but everyone who struggles with the desire to be a stakeholder in their community, yet are overwhelmed by the reality of living out that desire.

Where do we begin, to live out our faith and by so doing begin to create real and palpable change in our world? What does it mean to be builders of the architecture of our interdependence? For now, it may mean simply entertaining new ways to be church. It may mean reaching through our church walls all the way out to our sister congregations in Keene, Milford, Wilton, and Concord. It will definitely require us to begin creating new avenues of communication between our own church committees and the wider congregation. We're gonna' have to get to know one another! AND we're gonna' have to get to know some people beyond our doors.

And if that sounds challenging, or maybe even a bit scary, consider this; it's not nearly as risky as establishing a relationship with some homeless woman who's been harassing you for money you don't have. But the outcomes could be just as miraculous!

Won't you pray with me?

We are Unitarian Universalists because we need to run barefoot in the sands of the Spirit. We need to lay among green leaves, to let ourselves respond, without plan or rule, to soft earth and the fragrant promise morning. We need to love with wonder. We need to feel our flesh breathing with the pulsebeat of all life. We need to feel smallness.

Somehow, we need to know, to sense in every cell that fringed mystery in which we live. We want to be breathless before the universe. We want exultation and hallelujahs and ecstasy...we want to live pressed against the edge of the unknown. We want to hold hands with others in a dance of celebration...we want to embrace, surrender and live – consciously—a part of it all.

The very words – Unitarian and Universalist – imply our hearts desires. The seamless web of creation is one. We can seize it by dogma, stretch it by fanaticism, twist it by terror, or be builders of the infrastructure to support and sustain it.

Gracious Spirit of Life, since we have chosen this Unitarian Universalist path, let us accept the mystery, which is both an affirmation of life and of mystery in life. Grant us the serenity, the courage and the wisdom we need to live in peace with all of that.