

## **THINGS THAT CONNECT US**

### Sharing our Journeys, Our Hopes, Our Dreams

As I have been finding my way around Stockton, settling in, and getting acquainted, I have been thinking about all the things that connect us. It is Unitarian Universalism that brings us together, but when we take time to share our stories and beliefs, it is amazing how much we have in common. Oh, not that there aren't lots of differences too, but we have more in common than we often are ready to admit! In this movement we have often valued and protected our rugged individualism, our freedom, almost above anything else, but it is the shared experiences, the commonalities that really make a difference in our lives and the life of our religious community.

Unitarian Universalists have a dream of changing the world, making it more peaceful, more accepting of religious, political, and personal differences, making justice, equality, and compassion hallmarks of every society on the planet as well as the interactions between people, corporations, and nations. We express the loftiest most expansive values in our Principles, but we often have fallen short in our personal practices and interactions within our religious communities. Too often we assume that we want to approach the world in the same way when we have not taken the time to really get to know our fellow sojourners.

We may in the end discover that our goals, hopes, and dreams are indeed the same, but we need to take the time to learn each others' stories to know how we each came to those goals, hopes, and dreams. Often we may discover that our journeys have been similar, our pathways parallel, but there are many paths up the mountain of truth and wisdom. We have not all come here by the same narrow pathway, and that is truly one of the wonders of our movement. We may come to Unitarian Universalism for many different reasons and our personal journeys may be similar or different, but we each have our own story and we need to be able to tell it. We need to know that there are others in our community who will listen and understand, and who will in turn share their own stories with us.

We need to know that we are not alone, even if nobody else has quite the same story, the same journey as we do. Some of us may think of ourselves as completely rational, but few of us are so rational as to be unaffected by the life story of another human being. One of the things that makes us human is that we are social beings, even those of us who are introverts need contact with other human beings. The more genuinely we connect, the more honestly we are able to share our stories, our lives, our hopes and dreams, the stronger our community grows. Many of us have been wounded by things that happened during our lives, whether it be from religious oppression, difficulties in our families of origin, broken relationships, misunderstandings or a lack of acceptance around our gender identities, or any of a million other things. We each need a community that accepts us as we are, that is open to our ideas and will invite us to share our gifts and talents. We need genuine community in order to thrive as human beings.

It is when we have that base community that accepts and loves us, that we can go out to make a real difference in the world. Can you feel the love here in this community? You have certainly welcomed me with open arms, and I suspect that you do your best to welcome each person with love and acceptance. Not everyone is ready to feel it, and with so many introverts among Unitarian Universalists, we aren't always as demonstrative in welcoming newcomers as some groups may be. My experience though, is that when we take the time to share our own story and listen to other people's stories, we find a connection that runs deep in our shared humanity.

Even in this fragmented modern world, people yearn for connection, for community. Shopping has not been an experience of going to a well-known grocer in a local store in my lifetime. I grew up with Sears and Montgomery Ward, and Kmart, and more recently with Walmart and Sams and Costco. There was a time when people knew the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, but that time is long gone except for those folks who live in artisan communities! We might run into a friend or neighbor in the grocery store, but we will not likely know more than the name on the tag of an associate in any store we might visit. Our business connections and most of our social contacts may happen over the internet, and those who work from home may go days without seeing another human being.

We human beings are adaptable, but we need to connect with each other. We need to look in the eyes of other human beings, to see them as we talk, to hug, to laugh, to cry together. It is not enough to read each others' ideas in books or e-mails, we need to converse to really connect. We can stay in touch via letters or e-mails, and some do well with Facetime or Skype, but we need to spend time together to really connect.

I was reminded about the importance of sharing our stories several months ago by a newcomer who had recently joined my former congregation. He had been an organizer and was in process of becoming a teacher, but he took the time to share some of his story and to invite others to share their stories. What a difference it can make in our relationship with others if we know some of their story. When I lead newcomer classes, it has always been interesting to me to hear people talk about what brought them to Unitarian Universalism and where their journeys have led them religiously and spiritually, as well as philosophically and in their work life and education, but to really share stories requires going even deeper.

At core it is another question of meaning. What does it mean to have experienced what I have experienced, to have heard what I have heard, to have seen what I have seen? I can tell my story with bare facts, some interesting and some not, or I can take the time to share what I have discovered about the meaning of my life. I can talk about what it meant to be bullied for crying, being smart, fat, and having big ears when I was in elementary school, about the wounds that I carried for years. I can talk about the pain of my first divorce and the agony of being away from my young children when they were with their mother, even though they were with me half the time until they started school. I can tell you about the ways that the Vietnam War and the upheaval and fears of the 1960s shaped my life. I can tell you about my brother's nearly fatal accident and my pacifist leanings and why I became a minister rather than a scientist or engineer, or I can just tell you that I squeaked by with a C in my first Calculus course. Or I can just tell you that I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago during the 1960s and 70s and leave you to make your own assumptions!

When I tell you more of my story, you will understand me better! If you then take my lead and share more about what the experiences of your life have meant, we will have connected at a deeper level. It takes time and energy to share our stories, it can be risky for there are those who may judge us if they know too much about our hidden side, the pieces of ourselves that we do not let show. There are also those who may take advantage of our vulnerabilities, who may exploit or abuse us.

If we are the kind of church that encourages people to explore and discover their religious, spiritual and philosophical interests and attractions, we must also be a safe place where people will not be judged, exploited, or abused. We must instead be a place where people are accepted, loved, and tolerated, where many beliefs and practices are welcomed so long as they do no harm. We must be willing to hear the stories and beliefs of all who wish to be part of this community, even when we do not agree or are not interested in what some others are exploring and discovering. We must stretch ourselves to be radically hospitable and welcoming, to listen and understand.

I am far more comfortable as a Unitarian Universalist and UU Minister than I ever was as a United Methodist, but I experienced much love, acceptance, and encouragement growing up and going into Ministry as a United Methodist. Each tradition has many things to offer and we are far from perfect in this movement. We can learn many things from each tradition and every story we hear. Within Unitarian Universalism, we may be further along in our religious and spiritual journeys than others, or perhaps not! It is my own belief that we always can learn more and come to new insights and awareness, even if we have stopped actively exploring in some areas! One of the reasons I decided to make the move that brought me here was because I was too settled and needed some new adventures!

We each follow our own journey in our own way, and the story of that journey may be far more interesting to us than it will ever be to others. We are not all writers, we do not all have the timing to tell a joke well, we do not all have the lyrical flow to captivate our audience, but we each have a story to tell. To have a safe place to tell our stories is one of the greatest gifts we can give or receive.

As a congregation, we can offer Covenant Groups, Classes, groups and workshops that offer opportunities for telling our stories. Over the years, I have particularly enjoyed facilitating Dream Groups and Classes that offer people a chance to tell their stories as well as sharing their hopes and dreams. I expect that I will offer to facilitate at least a couple groups each year that may provide that kind of safe setting for going deeper. We each have things to share and we each have things to learn, and that too connects us!

I am fascinated by all the ways that people find to connect with others in this digital age. My daughter and her husband are connecting with a group of friends this weekend by bringing their computers to a gathering of friends in a big room to play on the Starship Enterprise, or would that be a holodeck? Anyway, my daughter the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and her husband, the IT guy for a small engineering firm connect with their friends by playing digital games! I always liked volleyball better myself, but it works for them! Jessica and Christian told me that they actually talk over snack breaks! I know from their wedding in March that they have some cool friends with whom they share modern life.

We all have this congregation as a safe meeting place where we can share our lives, our stories, our sense of meaning, our explorations and discoveries. As we get to know each other better, I hope that we can build this congregation into an ever stronger and more meaningful community. I look forward to hearing more of your stories in the days to come! So may it Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Amen!