

WE ARE: A CARING COMMUNITY:
Caring for Each Other and Letting People Care for You!

I thought that November might be a good time to think about who we really are as a congregation, so all of my sermons in November start out with “We are.” Now, of course, anything that I suggest remains entirely my own opinion, and you will have opportunities to expand or rebut anything that I say about who we are. There are at least two things happening in this period that may affect what we do or at least how we do things in coming months. Stockton has just completed its bankruptcy plan in that it now has been released legally from bankruptcy supervision. There is also an election this Tuesday which could result in changes of civic leadership and in other societal changes from propositions on this ballot. The immediate impact to 1st UU Church from all of those possible changes, may of course be minimal, but some changes may indirectly affect us through their impact on our members. Be that as it may, we are and will be a caring community. The question behind this sermon is really whether we can be more effective as a caring community, and if so, how?

Unitarian Universalist congregations, like most religious institutions, are generally pretty good at caring for our members and friends. We help out when a member or friend has a problem or concern. Sometimes we reach out to check on members or friends if we haven’t seen them in a while, perhaps even going so far as to visit them. Oftentimes when we don’t know somebody is hurting or ill we fail to notice that person’s absence, assuming that they are busy or traveling. When we notice someone is not around or when we hear that someone is having a tough time, we respond pretty well. We are not very intentional about checking on people that aren’t around however.

With our belief in the freedom of choice people have around religion, we are wary of annoying anyone by asking why they haven’t been in

church. We are perhaps afraid of being accused of using guilt to get someone to come to church! With our Universalist heritage not believing in Hell, we don't have a lot of fear to work with, so we do what we can! Guilt doesn't work that well on UUs anyway. Eldest children and other responsible types might yield to appeals to responsibility...but I digress!

We are generally caring folk who want to support each other in difficult times and to be friends all the time.

When asked to help out with a special need, we are more likely to say yes than not, but we don't tend to sign up to do things on a regular basis, like giving others rides or preparing meals. We don't really mind doing such things, but we are busy and don't want to have to cancel or say no on days when our plans don't mesh. Many of us are also introverts, not by nature joiners anyway and we are not the first to step forward to help with anything. We often need a bit of encouragement or a personal invitation. And we certainly don't want to push ourselves on anyone anyway. We will help a bit sooner for people we know, whom we consider friends.

We can get energized and organized when someone is ill or grieving. We have even been known to cook casseroles or arrange for meals for those in need. It usually takes one of our extroverts to coordinate those things, but we are all glad to help. We also have been known to send cards and to make calls when we know there is a need. But because UUs are terrible about asking for help or letting anyone know if they are going into the hospital, or have another need, too often we don't know and we lose chances to minister to each other.

That is the other side to caring, that we be open to receive caring from others, to admit that we are not always healthy, happy, and in good spirits. We are not good about admitting, even to ourselves, when we are depressed or discouraged. We carry the heritage of radical independence and individuality, taking the 'I can do it myself' attitude to an unhealthy

extreme. Many of us may not believe in an external deity, but we also may not recognize the power of the caring community to support each other in difficult times. We may express our belief in the interconnected interdependent web of life, and yet we act as if we are all free planets floating in space. At the most basic level, we humans are social beings who need each other, both when we mourn and when we celebrate. Without some kind of contact with other human beings, we quickly become unbalanced, disconnected, if not totally crazy. Human babies need hugs and touches to thrive, and so do we all! Even for introverts, too much aloneness is unhealthy.

One of the best things that we offer to each other in this congregation is a connection with other like-minded and like-hearted people. Though we may spend far more time talking about our shared values and principles, it is our heart-connections that really hold the congregation together. We care enough to be interested in each other's lives, to ask each other how we each are and look for an answer more than 'fine' or 'ok.' We may be a bit reserved, sometimes even formidable, but inside we really do care. We wish each other well, and mean it. We reach out tentatively but compassionately.

Though most of us have been wounded by some kind of loss or broken relationship or period of depression, we wish each other well and are willing to listen to each other's stories, sadness, and grief. Most of us have been around the block a few times, enough to have earned whatever gray may tinge our hair and beards. We may seem like we are in a hurry, but we will be there if you ask. We will sit with you and listen to you, sometimes we will share our own experiences but mostly we will listen. That is what caring people do in a caring community.

When we choose to take on Social Justice projects, it is usually because something is conflicting with our values, but when we really engage in such efforts, it is most likely because our hearts, our compassion has become involved. Now because many of us have accumulated a lot of years and miles, we are a bit slower in responding to such needs.

Some of us hope that younger members will lead on such social justice projects and caring concerns. Many of us are tired and feel as though we have done our part, and we certainly have accomplished a lot in our lifetimes. The needs are still there, and perhaps even more plentiful in this current world. And as our church members get older, there are more caring needs within the church. There are several people right now within our community who need our caring, not so much with food as with contact, calls and letters and e-mails, the touch of our voice or our hands. We may feel as though we just don't have much left to give, but there is always something we can do to help each other.

We have been talking about forming a Caring committee to help reach out to those in need. We will probably be asking for volunteers to help out in various ways, and I hope everyone will feel they can help in some way. I would like to see us offer rides to those who would come but no longer drive and need some encouragement. I hope that we will continue to be able to take food, meals to those who are grieving. I would like to see us check up on people just by calling to see how they are doing. I would like to see us make calls even if people are fairly regular in attendance at church, just because!

We are a caring community, but we don't always do as much as we might to show how we care for others in our community. Sometimes the need is as simple as offering a listening ear or a ride to the Doctor or to church. Sometimes people need help with finances, legal documents or taxes or more complex matters beyond what we can offer, but we can still help to find needed resources and make connections.

We are caring individuals within a caring community, but there is more that we can do. Now I would like to give you a few minutes to share your ideas of what more we can do!

Thank you for sharing, thank you for your ideas, thank you for caring!

Shalom, Salam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!