

“Putting Down Roots”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
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I want to talk today about what it takes to be in community together. The nitty-gritty of community life. I want to talk about the hard work of being AND STAYING in community together.

At our annual denominational meeting in June, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association—Peter Morales—shared some recent statistics concerning social isolation. These numbers come from a 2004 study published in the American Sociological Review. The study reported that when asked to whom they could confide their personal troubles, 25% of people surveyed reported having NO ONE. Not a spouse or partner, not a family member, not a neighbor. One in four people. This number is more than DOUBLE what it was in 1985, when this same survey was taken. That’s a big change in just 20 years.

Of those who have SOMEONE to confide in, 80% of people surveyed reported that they confide their personal troubles to FAMILY ONLY. That’s a 40% increase from 1985. I don’t think that confiding in family is bad, but it speaks—again—to isolation. When our only confidantes are family members, that means we have few connections to people from different backgrounds, people with different life experiences and world views.

That’s a lot of numbers, so let me summarize. One in four people have nobody to confide in. Of those who have someone to talk to, the vast majority of people confide only in their family members. This means that only 15% of all people

surveyed have anyone outside their family to talk to. That's not very many. I hope those of us here are part of that 15%.

What the survey doesn't tell us is WHY this dramatic increase in social isolation, and sociologists have lots of theories, including the prevalence of television, increase in time spent at work, long commutes, etc. And I'm sure there's truth in each of those theories.

But here's what I see: I see that Americans are losing the SKILLS of being in community together. We think—many of us—that having friendships and being together should occur rather easily, like when we were kids in grade school. This is particularly a challenge for those of us in younger generations, and I expect that many of the elders in this community will have observed what I'm talking about.

These relationship skills include the willingness to forgive; the ability to be in healthy, respectful conflict with each other; the ability to work together; the willingness to compromise; being able to give of ourselves, not just receive; the ability to set boundaries and say no; the willingness to take responsibility for mistakes; being able to ask for help; the ability to share our authentic selves with one another; the ability to love people who aren't just like us; being able to admit when we're wrong; being able to appreciate the gifts and quirks of others; the willingness to name our vulnerability; the ability to listen, and listen well.

These are the skills of being in relationship. These are the skills of friendship. These are the skills of being in community together, as we strive to be in community here.

I could go on and on, but what this looks like is this: when the going gets tough in our friendships, we leave. When a friend lets us down, when we feel misunderstood, when someone hurts our feelings, when WE hurt someone ELSE'S feelings...we abandon the friendship, many of us, instead of working it out. We also expect our friends to have lots in common with us, and when too much changes—a friend gets married or moves away or changes their political views—sometimes it seems to make sense to let the friendship go. We expect our friends to meet our needs, and when they don't, there is little reason to hang onto the friendship.

What this looks like in congregational life is what's called "church shopping," a fairly recent and predominantly American trend. Americans are looking for churches and religious communities that meet our needs, religious, spiritual, and social, and when a church stops meeting that need, many folks start looking for a new church. We evaluate churches for what they can give us rather than what we can give them.

And it isn't just as simple as staying or going. What this ALSO looks like is withdrawing from community when times are hard. I wonder how many of us here have stopped coming to church while we've been in financial trouble, or we've had a death in the family, or we lost our jobs. At the very time that we could share with our friends our worries and hurts and vulnerabilities, instead we pull away because we're embarrassed or ashamed or even afraid. Most of us like to present a face to the world of confidence and success, and when we can't—when we can't present that face to the world—we close down rather than asking for help.

Who do you confide your personal troubles to?

In case this all sounds like chastisement, let me be clear: I have done everything that I just talked about. I have abandoned friendships that no longer met my needs, and I have passed on churches for the simple reason that the worship time wasn't convenient for me. I have also pulled away from friends and family when my life has been in turmoil. We all of us have to evaluate what works in our lives and what doesn't.

But here's what I want to lift up: the most meaningful relationships I have are those that have seen hard times and come through them. The people I call friends are those who have seen me at my most vulnerable and helped me find the strength to get through. And being in church community—staying in church community—has been one of the most healing and transforming practices of my life.

Although I believe that important spiritual work can be accomplished in solitude—indeed, some kinds of spiritual work can ONLY be accomplished in solitude—I also believe that we need to be in community with one another in order to work towards becoming our best selves. It is easy to feel love for all humanity when we are sitting alone at the edge of a quiet lake, but challenging to feel love for the person who said they would come early to help set up chairs but then didn't. It is easy to value compromise when we want compromise from others, but challenging to hold that value when WE are the ones being asked to compromise. It is easy to feel compassion for people we read about in books or in the news, whose hard lives drive them to desperate measures, but challenging to feel compassion for the person who steals our portable music player out of our cabin at church camp.

These challenges are made all the harder by our sense that church life should be...ideal. Don't you think that? At least sometimes? I do. We're gathered in religious community, pursuing spiritual and intellectual growth together. Aren't we supposed to be on our best behavior, living our highest ideals together?

My example about having something stolen from a cabin at church camp wasn't fictional; that happened to me (don't worry, it wasn't THIS church). But there is a Unitarian Universalist out there somewhere who took something from me, out of my cabin, during a week when I had undoubtedly spent time with that person. A week when I had VOLUNTEERED my time to help with the event. I was less hurt and upset to have my house broken into last year than I was to have something stolen from me by a fellow UU.

But after my first wave of anger and hurt had passed, I remembered that I had—up to that point—had a wonderful time at camp. There were 69 other UUs at camp who were uniformly outraged that something had been stolen from me. I got hugs. People shared with me that this wasn't the first time this had happened at a camp. We talked about how incidents like this one threaten the community as a whole, threaten our ability to be together in a way that is respectful. We do not want church camp to become a place where people's bags are searched or where we look at each other with suspicion and distrust.

And none of THAT changes the fact that I'm still hurt and angry. I hold the complexity of my love for my community with my frustration that someone in that community behaved in a way that is reprehensible to me. And that's it! There's no

more resolution than that. There's no moment where I feel forgiveness wash over me like a healing balm. There's no story where someone regrets taking my music player and comes forward. This is just messy and unsatisfying and hard. This is the hard work of being in community together.

The importance of community to spiritual life is affirmed by the world's major religions. The Catholic Church defines its members as those who have met catechismal requirements and then ATTEND church. It is not enough to say you're Catholic but never go, and "lapsed" Catholics—as they're called—are likely to be denied sacraments such as communion and anointing of the sick if the person requesting them is found NOT to have been attending church. In Protestant traditions, the value of community is found in the emphasis on Holy Communion, on coming together to receive the sacrament.

In Buddhism, the monastic community—called the sangha—that is supported by the larger Buddhist community—is seen as the point of connection between Buddha and his followers, the revelatory vehicle through which the Buddha and his teachings are expressed. There is no Buddhism without the community of Buddhists. Similarly, Muslims honor community as a place to preserve Islamic values and culture in an aggressively secular world.

I have to say that when I look at our Unitarian Universalist principles and our sources of faith, I don't see compelling articulations of the value of community. I love and treasure our principles and sources as the very foundations of my religious life, BUT they do reflect a grandiose view of our work. We affirm and promote the

inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person; justice, equity and compassion of HUMAN relations; references to “society at large,” “world community,” “peace, liberty, and justice for ALL,” and the “interdependent web of ALL existence.” It might be nice to have just one statement about the importance of gathering together at church once in a while. Especially in a world where one in four people have nobody to talk to.

The closest we get to a statement about the value of community is in our third principle: we affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. I think that “acceptance of one another” is spiritual work that easily takes a lifetime, and it goes hand in hand with affirming inherent worth and dignity. In any community, there will always be conflicts, people who don’t see eye-to-eye, people who just get on each other’s nerves, and situations that bring out our own worst behavior, our impatience, our short-temperedness, our sarcasm.

If our only response to those challenges is to withdraw, then we miss out. We miss out on spiritual growth; we miss out on the deepening of relationships; we miss out on that which makes community precious. One of the many gifts of community, in my mind, is that we are here for each other in good times and bad. Although someone in my community stole from me, I still had a community to hug me and support me and commiserate with me. Yes, it was messy and unsatisfying and hard. But it was also comforting and loving and communal.

We sang in our gathering hymn, “roots hold me close, wings set me free.” I have to admit that in this most beloved of UU hymns, the metaphor of roots with wings always troubles me. I know the allusion to freedom speaks to many of us of the intellectual and spiritual freedom we have found in Unitarian Universalism.

But there is something about the image of flying away that runs counter to my experience of community and to the gifts of staying put. For me, Unitarian Universalism has never been about being set free, it has been about finding a home, about grounding myself in UU community and its faith traditions. It has meant that when I’ve grown and changed so that my needs were no longer being met in the same ol’ ways, I’ve looked for new ways to engage and to serve, so that I am once again growing and changing. It has meant learning to apologize, to compromise, to be honest and authentic, to give and receive, to name my vulnerabilities, to know and accept my own shortcomings, and yes, to accept others as they are. For me, Unitarian Universalism has meant putting down roots INSTEAD of flying away.

To me, when we are gathered here together, we are like a grove of trees. Our roots extend down from the bases of our spines, down our legs, down and out our feet, through the floor of this building, and down into the rich soil of the earth. Our roots spread deep and far and wide, tangling with the roots of the people around us. Down through our roots we release our worries and our tensions, our fears. These we release into the soil where they will be transformed, like compost, into energy we can use. Up through these roots, we draw nourishment from the soil, moisture and loving

energy to heal and sustain us. Through our shared and tangled roots we are continuously exchanging our fears for love.

Up from the bases of our spines extend our branches, up and out, far out into the sky, reaching for all our hopes of what could be in this world. Our branches tangle with the branches of those around us, just as our roots are intertwined below. Our interwoven branches form a canopy of leaves above us. When we feel weak, the branches of the people around us will support us. We can lean on them. When feel weak, they can lean on us. Under this canopy of shade we are protected and strengthened and sustained by one another. Under this canopy of shade, our connectedness brings beauty and healing to a wounded and isolated world.

May this vision of connectedness and nourishment always be a reminder to us of the best that we can be together. May it be so. Blessed be.