

DECEMBER'S THEME: COMMUNION
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
December 7, 2014
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg

OPENING WORDS

~ inspired by Helen Shucman¹

Be still, and lay aside all thoughts of what you are and what God is;
Lay aside all concepts you have learned about the world;
Put away all the images you hold about yourself.
Empty your mind of everything it thinks is either true or false,
or good or bad, of every thought it judges worthy,
and all the ideas of which it is ashamed.
Hold onto nothing.
Put down whatever you were carrying when you entered this place.
Do not bring with you one thought the past has taught,
nor one belief you ever learned before from anything.
Forget this world, forget who you might be,
and come with wholly empty hands into this place of communion.
Come. Be here. Be here with others. Come.
Let us be here together.

STORY FOR ALL *All I See is Part of Me* ~ Chara M. Curtis

(In this story, a child speaks to the sun and the stars and learns that the light that is within is the same light that is everywhere.)

READING

Communion

~ Robert Fulghum²

Once upon a time, somewhere far back in ancient human history – so far back that personal survival was the only concern – a defining event must have taken place. Someone didn't eat what he found when he found it, but decided to take it back to the cave to share with others. There must have been a first time. A first act of community – call it communion – in the most elemental form.

As with other important things, I learned about this in kindergarten. Or, I should say, I finally understood it by being with little children.

When my first son was in kindergarten, I was a parent volunteer who visited the school once a week to teach folk songs to the children. Singing came between naptime and snacktime. Regularly, I was invited to stay after singing and join the class for milk and cookies. I gladly stayed. Not because I was particularly hungry, but because I enjoyed watching the children carry out this ordinary task with such extraordinary care.

Since learning community cooperation is an essential part of kindergarten, the

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/568462-be-still-and-lay-aside-all-thoughts-of-what-you>

² Fulghum, Robert, *From Beginning to End; the Rituals of Our Lives*, pp 78-79

children took turns bringing cookies from home. Each day every child had an essential job in the sharing.

Two children set the table with napkins and cups. Two other arranged chairs. Others went to the refrigerator for cartons of milk, while two more fetched the cookies from the cupboard and arranged them neatly on plates. One child was responsible for placing something in the middle of the table to talk about during the snack – anything the child wished, but something the others might appreciate, as well. Show and tell.

For half the class, their job for the day was being good guests. Saying, “Yes, please, I would like to have some milk,” and “Thank you very much,” and “how nice the table looks.” An important task.

When all were served, everyone was expected to sit quietly for a moment, with hands folded in the lap, until the teacher said, “Let’s share.” Each ‘host’ took a cookie off his plate, broke it in half, and gave it to a “guest” before eating the other half himself.

During this snacktime, they discussed the “think about” object in the center of the table – a book, a goldfish in a bowl, a toy, whatever. After the cookies and milk were consumed, the children who had played “guests” for the day cleaned up and put away everything, before all went out to play.

The children did this efficiently and unselfconsciously – it was their routine. I, too, took the event seriously. It was a high point in my week.

A lovely, sane moment with people – never mind our different in age.

The finest, simplest elements of civilization at work.

It served as an example of the way daily habits become sacred rites. For me, it was communion.

MESSAGE

Communion

~ Rev. Stoneberg

For four years, while attending seminary, I had almost daily opportunities to partake of incredible cultural events. One particular experience stands out....hearing Thich Nhat Hanh speak at the Berkeley Community Theatre. That led me to read several of his books, and I found myself particularly drawn to his concept of inter-being; he has written beautifully about looking at a piece of paper, and seeing there the clouds that form the rain, the rain that waters the trees, that grows the wood...the wood that is transported by horses (or trucks or trains), and made into pulp, and formed into paper...how contained in a piece of paper are all of the people and beings and elements that contributed to that paper’s very being. In this way, he says, we ‘inter-be’ with all that is. His is one of the loveliest descriptions of interconnection that I’ve ever heard.

Interbeing. Interconnection. Communion. We are ‘one with all that is.’

I credit my good friend Tom for our December theme, ‘communion,’ and for taking me, and us, into places we may not otherwise have travelled. When I was in the process of plotting out the themes for this year, I wanted a theme for December that captured the experience of giving and receiving. I posted the question on Facebook...what one word

captures that experience?...and Tom provided the first, and ultimately most compelling, response. Communion. The experience of giving and receiving.

But, as compelling as the concept of communion may be, as I got deeper and deeper into it, I realized that we could not explore communion in that broader sense, without first exploring the deep associations some of us might have with Communion...the Eucharist...the Lord's Supper...as a sacrament of the Christian faith.

In the process of writing any sermon, there are often unexpected gifts, mysterious synchronicities. Such is the case today. Two weeks ago, our small band of Southern Ontario UU ministers gathered for a few days of retreat and professional development. Our own Lori Kyle, who was our intern minister last year, offered the worship service one morning, and wouldn't you know, she had prepared a communion service. A plate of bread was passed, and we each took a piece. She guided us to consider that piece of bread...much like Thich Nhat Hanh's piece of paper...and to imagine all that had brought it into its current form...the seed, the ground, the rain, the sun, the hands that harvested it, and made the flour, and baked the bread...and as we ate it, she asked us to be aware of how it was now becoming a part of us...that it was now contributing to our very being...just as we were contributing to its changing form and future.

As the bread became glutinous in my mouth, matching the temperature and substance of my body, I had a most visceral experience of communion ...a sensation of oneness...of both giving and receiving. It opened me to consider that this might be what some people regularly experience when partaking of the Eucharist... a sense of deep connection with the source, the ground, past and present, of all that is. I understood communion in a way I never had before.

Next week we're going to explore the power of rituals and traditions, and the role they play in creating meaning, and communal bonds...through shared experience. Yet not all rituals 'take'...not all traditions create positive memories. As someone who suffers from this myself, I understand that some of you have PTCO...post traumatic communion disorder. I also expect that some others of you may well be suffering from FTCS...failure to commune syndrome. Both of these 'ailments' on opposite ends of the spectrum are present here in this spiritual community, plus everything in between. It says volumes about the power of the ritual of communion that some of us have been damaged by it, and some of us are longing for it.

You might already sense that I walk into this exploration with trepidation...on egg shells...recognizing how tenderly we hold our pain and our memories, and wanting also to respect the practice of communion that many hold dear. Yet I have learned through personal experience that when I encounter hard places, resistance, within and without, that's when it's most important to look more closely...and to examine the source of that resistance. I invite you into that examination with me.

I speak first to the damage. I do not assume that I understand any pain you might feel about communion, yet there are certain elements of the sacrament that might have contributed to that hurt.

First, there's that sort of creepy trans-substantiation thing...you know, how the bread supposedly actually becomes the flesh, and the wine (or grape juice) actually becomes blood. It may be that most who partake don't really believe this, but the words used still say that it is so. "Take, eat, this is Christ's body broken for you." It's unreasonable, and difficult to swallow.

Then, there's the exclusion piece. It is a Christian ritual, and rightfully, should not be expected to be inclusive of those who do not identify as Christian. But, the Communion table is often presented as welcoming to all, while being reserved for the few...those of a certain age, or certain belief, or who have been baptized, or gone through confirmation classes, or who have first confessed of their sins. No matter how 'open' the table is, some feel like outsiders. This feeling of exclusion was well expressed in one of the stories in the December theme packet...(if you didn't get one by email, you can pick up a copy from our brochure rack in the foyer.)

There's also, of course, the association that Communion, the Eucharist, has with a particular dogma or belief system (systems, really, since there are many different expressions of the Eucharist within Christianity.) It assumes a common belief, even an imposed belief, that might not be shared by all. That kind of creedal imposition can feel oppressive to some.

Let me say again that I mean no disrespect for the ritual of Communion. It is a very important practice, central to the faith of a particular religious tradition, or traditions. In fact, I believe we may find new appreciation and understanding of it through this month's exploration. But I also recognize that some of us have been hurt by it, and some have thoughtfully rejected it.

But, let's look at communion in a broader sense. Oneness, interconnection, inter-being, community, union with...communion, as a concept, is deeply resonant with Unitarian Universalism. Where have you found, or wish you could find, the experience of communion in your life? On a crowded bus? In a forest glade? In an everyday interaction with a store clerk? Around a table? Take a moment and picture it. Where do you find, or long for, deeper communion? (*pause*)

Did any of you think of our coffee hour? Paula joked earlier about this being our "coffee communion" but that's not completely off base. Our time of fellowship following the service is something of a ritual...a few make the preparations, set up the tables, and put out the 'elements.' And then we come, ready to drink, and eat, and be warmed by our connections. It is meant to be inclusive, and nourishing (despite the store-bought cookies,) and community-building. And for some it is; yet for others, for a variety of reasons and realities, it is not. Would it be more so, if we were more intentional about it? If we better recognized in it the possibility of communion?

What did you imagine when you thought of communion? A place? A ritual? The presence of others? In meditation? With a particular sensation? People who speak of the experience of oneness describe having found it in the most mundane moments...hearing birdsong, brushing their teeth, brushing up against a stranger. It is

both fleeting and ever-present, both deeply personal and profoundly communal. And, everyone has the chance to experience it. You. Me. All of us.

I truly have no interest in appropriating the Eucharist for our purposes. While many UU congregations do celebrate communion (there's a book to prove it,) I don't know if a ritual communion is possible, or even desirable, here. But I am concerned that by resisting the word itself, or holding fast to our past associations with it, we not only show disrespect for something that has deep meaning for others, but more importantly, we lose the powerful potential 'communion' contains for us, in whatever form it might take.

Here's what I think I know, today, about Unitarian communion.

Communion, Unitarian-style, reminds us of our connectedness, of how we 'interbe' with all that is. Unitarian communion might take us out into nature and help us to become a part of the ground under our feet, to walk alongside the creatures and plants, to sense our spirits merging with the wind and the clouds. A Unitarian communion, like the one I participated in with Lori, would help us to pause and remember how deeply all of life is interwoven.

Communion, Unitarian-style, welcomes and embraces diversity. It allows for people to choose how and if they want to participate. It challenges us to recognize that in the simple act of 'setting a table', we exclude something or someone, by making assumptions about what would be nourishing or accessible.

A Unitarian communion would express gratitude for the privileges we have, all the while knowing that any privilege can blind us. It would remind us that not all have food, or drink, or equal rights, or freedom, and call us to work to correct those injustices.

Communion, Unitarian-style, emphasizes the possibility of transformation...perhaps physically in the way that food and drink is converted to energy...but more surely metaphorically....demonstrating that we need to commune...with spirit, with nature, with our inner voices, with others, with community...we need to commune in order to be changed. The alchemy that is transformation requires more than one ingredient, and multiple ingredients are present anytime we inter-be with one another...in communion.

Unitarian communion is synonymous with beloved community...in its inclusivity, in the act of sharing, in the openness of hands and hearts to receive, in the wideness of its understanding...seeing our community as ALL that is. It embraces imperfection, it encourages forgiveness, it creates and strengthens bonds of love.

Communion Unitarian-style, whenever, wherever, with whom or whatever, would strive to be all of these things.

A colleague shared this excerpt from a short essay with me. Titled "Love with Claws

and Jaws,"³ it was written by Carolyn Raffensburger, a long-time environmental activist. She writes:

"I wanted power to stop bad things. I wanted power to protect pelican babies, whales, the native prairie. I wanted power to restore the Earth to health...

A Navaho friend of mine, a young medicine man, called. I asked him, "What is power?" ... He answered without hesitating. "Power," he said, "is when you have the ability to speak with all the animals and plants and they have the willingness to speak to you." The proverbial light bulb went on in my head: Power is communion. ...

The Oxford Dictionary defines communion as sharing or holding in common, participation, community, participation in the sacraments, common action. I mean communion in all of these senses when I speak of this kind of power. As a Mennonite, I believe that I cannot be fully who I am outside of a community - of humans, plants, animals, microbes. This commitment is... fundamental to my faith.

Communion is the most formidable power we can use in our work on environmental health: communion with each other, communion with the natural world. People in isolation from other humans and other animals and trees suffer deteriorating mental health, because health itself is dependent on communion.

Communion is the power of love, the opposite of ...the power of coercion."

Accepting her perspective, our health itself is dependent on communion, because it brings us out of isolation and into life-giving reciprocity.

Accepting this perspective, our power to change ourselves and the world around us is dependent on communion. Communion brings us into a down to earth, gritty participation in and with life, with all beings.

Accepting this perspective, communion is the power of love, the most formidable power we can have. Communion is that 'deep breath we take over and over again'⁴ for and with one another, taking in and letting out, giving and receiving. It is the cycle of life and of the seasons, how one thing gives to another so that life can continue, while at the same time, receiving what both allows and empowers us to be changed.

In his meditation, *Communion with Earth and Sky*, Rev. Stephen Shick writes:⁵

Soon we will no longer look to the night stars to guide us.
Soon the path will be lit and our task certain.

³ <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/a-new-culture-emerges/398>

⁴ Mary Oliver, *Sunrise* <http://readalittlepoetry.wordpress.com/2010/12/25/sunrise-by-mary-oliver/>

⁵ *Communion with Earth and Sky* Stephen M. Shick

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditations/19830.shtml>

In the warming days we will plant our future,
uprooting useless skeletons of last year's harvest,
breaking the clods of indifference,
carefully pulling the weeds of neglect
so that roots can stretch.

...

Then the harvest.

Then the transformation.

Then the baking.

Then the bread.

All we know and love is in this cycle.

All that has been or will be is in this loaf.

Take it.

Break it.

Give thanks

and pass it on.

This do in remembrance of our interconnection with all that is. Amen.

READING

The Stream of Life

~ Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through
the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless
blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and
in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride
is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

*CLOSING WORDS

~ Martha Kirby Capo⁶

Our time together is finished, but our work is not yet done:

May our spirits be renewed and our purpose resolved

As we meet the challenges of the week to come.

The chalice flame is extinguished

Until once again ignited by the strength of our communion.

Go now in peace.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/closings/142732.shtml>