

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
JANUARY'S THEME: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF RELATIONSHIP?
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
JANUARY 3, 2016

OPENING WORDS *Enter the Circle* ~ Dori J. Somers¹

Let us enter into the circle of energy and love;

All are welcome here.

We are an inclusive community of faith and kindness, memory and hope;

All are welcome here.

We are a community with a deep and abiding trust in the promise of goodness in every human heart and soul.

All are welcome here.

We are a community of quest, where we gather to study and search.

All are welcome here.

We are a community of service, where the gifts we give and receive are compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and devotion.

All are welcome here.

We are a community of joy and laughter, where the worth of every individual is celebrated.

All are welcome here.

You are welcome here. All are welcome to this time set-apart for worship and reflection.

STORY FOR ALL *Otter and Odder: A Love Story* ~ James Howe

(The story of an Otter and a fish who fall in love and are torn between listening to the voices of others and following their hearts.)

READING *The Grout* ~ Marcus Liefert²

The Unitarian Universalist congregation where I served as an intern made a mosaic Tree of Life the summer before I arrived. Congregants of all ages came together to craft the tree's leaves, using bits and pieces of broken ceramics, jewelry, glass, and stone.

There are many precious personal items in the tree, including fragments of the Berlin Wall, a father's watch face, pieces of great grandmother's china, and a key to the front door of a loved home. Like the members of the community that brought them together, each part is imbued with memories and meaning; each fragment holds a piece of truth.

Unitarian Universalists are mosaic makers. We are a people who bring together the broken pieces of our histories and the shining pieces of our seeking and, piece by piece, create a mosaic religion. Our Tree of Life is found in the stories of our living tradition.

The bead from a transformational moment of worship at a youth conference. The bit of paper stamped with the blazing emblem of the Unitarian Service Committee that saved lives during World War II. The button or patch on a backpack that proudly proclaims

¹ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/litany/enter-circle>

² <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/grout>

the first justice issue that lit our souls on fire. But our mosaic making tells another story too, one that is often more difficult to see. One that is essential to the purpose of religious community. One that lies not in the beautiful and broken bits and pieces but in the grout.

Grout. The chalky, gritty stuff that is squeezed between the cracks of tiles. In a mosaic, the grout holds the image together, unifying disparate pieces into a whole. The grout of a community takes years to lay and settle. Grout happens in board meetings and committee meetings and endless emails and slow-moving institutions. It is in weekly potlucks shared by neighbors, a ride to church, and coffee in the social hall after worship. While the folks who show up for church only on Christmas and Easter will hopefully enjoy the beauty of the mosaic they find, they may never know the power of the grout that holds us through all the seasons of life.

We help to make the grout when we learn each other's names and when we reach out across generational divides. We help to make the grout when we show up on Sunday morning without having checked first to see if we're interested in the sermon topic. When a newborn arrives to be blessed by the community, it is the grout that enables us to welcome them. And it is in the grout that we rest when we gather to grieve and memorialize a beloved one who has died.

Hold us, O Grout.

Gather us in, through time and space, and make all our broken pieces whole in community. In our multiplicity, make us one. From each of our jagged edges, give us the shape of a communal beauty.

MESSAGE *Being People of Relationship* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

If prayer would do it³
I'd pray.
If reading esteemed thinkers would do it
I'd be halfway through the Patriarchs.
If discourse would do it
I'd be sitting with His Holiness
every moment he was free.
If contemplation would do it
I'd have translated the Periodic Table
to hermit poems, converting
matter to spirit.
If even fighting would do it
I'd already be a blackbelt.
If anything other than love could do it
I've done it already

³ "If Prayer Would Do It" by Stephen Levine from *Breaking the Drought*

and left the hardest for last.

Relationships. They are ubiquitous, and they are not easy.

You may know by now that one of my favourite movies is “Being There” starring Peter Sellers. It tells the tale of a simple-minded gardener who is mistaken for a member of his deceased employer’s family...a twist on a rags to riches story. Though he doesn’t offer them as such, his simple statements about gardening are assumed to be wise and clever metaphors. The best lessons sometimes come in the guise of parable, analogy and metaphor.

Wisdom about relationships is no exception (and, while I am speaking of human relationships today, as always you may take what I say and apply it wherever you will.) For example, there’s the metaphor of music... suggesting that living in right relationship is like playing in a band. Relationships wouldn’t be interesting if everyone played the same notes, or had the same instrument. This metaphor implies that it’s the diversity, each individual with a distinct part to play, that makes for beautiful music...and harmony... and relationship.

Of course, one could pick this example apart, suggesting that harmony is only possible if everyone wants to play the same piece of music. One could bemoan our human failure as musicians...unfamiliar with the instrument or unable to read the score. Or one could point out that such music requires a great conductor who controls the players (and of course, no such great conductor exists, nor would we want to be directed by one.) No metaphor, after all, stands up to literalist critique. There is tension in metaphor...fecund tension.

And, to speak of relationship is to explore a classic tension...a tension particularly evident in Unitarian communities, it seems to me...a tension between the individual and the group... between the distinct self and the community...a resistance to being part of something larger.

Or maybe this is the universal human journey...to discover our own selves and to grow as unique individuals, while also, and always, longing to connect and be in relationship. When do we compromise and when do we stand firm? In what ways are we willing to risk and be vulnerable for the sake of belonging, for the sake of being loved? When do we listen to the voices of others and when do we listen to our own hearts? And ultimately, why? Why do all the work that relationship requires?

Our longing for relationship comes from the lure of their potential, and from our commitments to the ideal of the beloved community. In the words of Tara Brach, “relationships have the potential to be a sacred refuge, a place of healing, and awakening.”⁴ Relationships allow us to know and be known, in the most intimate of ways. Yet, our reservations about relationship come from our all-too-real experiences of hurt and betrayal, that mix leaving us with complex and myriad questions about how to be, and if we want to be, people of relationship.

So, let’s try something. Just for a few minutes, put aside your reasoning mind, and your cynicism. Put aside a need for clear answers. I know it’s a lot to ask, but go on. Put them aside. Now, gently put on your child eyes, and your child heart.

⁴ Tara Brach, BREATHING OUT: OFFERING OUR CARE: Transforming suffering, from the Spring issue 2013 of Parabola Magazine, “Spirit in the World.”

Ready? Now, bring to mind a mosaic like the one Paul just told you about. Use your imagination...make it a really beautiful mosaic...can you see it? Maybe it's on a wall, or a tabletop, imbedded in a floor... See it? Then, blur your eyes and pull your vision wide to see the whole. Don't look at individual pieces but rather the patterns that they create. Like jigsaw pieces, all the bits together create a kind of community in which the lines of distinction are almost lost, in which the individual colours make the larger picture possible. Notice the intricate patterns. See how what was broken and separate now serves something beyond any individual possibility. Forget that it's a mosaic, and see only the whole. Appreciate its beauty.

But now, shift your focus to see the individual pieces of glass or tile...see each unique shape and colour and texture. Move your eyes from piece to piece...see those with broken edges, and those with a remaining bit of a painted design. See how some are like a topographical map, with raised bumps and depressions...how some glimmer in the light and others are dull and opaque. Look carefully at the individual pieces, appreciating the worth and integrity of every one. Isn't each one beautiful?

Which do you prefer? The big picture? Pull back and look at the whole again. Or do you most like seeing the individual bits? Zoom in once more to see the individual tiles. Now, can you see yourself in this mosaic? Which piece are you? What's your shape, your colour, your texture? Do you have any broken edges? What pieces surround you?

Now, let's go back in time...a time before this mosaic was assembled. Where were you before? In a bin chock full of assorted pieces of dirty china and chunks of worn pottery? Were you lying forgotten in a drawer somewhere, a chard meant to be glued back onto a long-discarded teapot? Were you a bit of glass worn smooth by the ocean's waves? Maybe you were in a landfill, longing to be unearthed, or simply hanging out with several other pieces from the same plate. Or, perhaps you were waiting patiently on a shelf at a tile factory, freshly pressed and wanting to be put to use.

Do you still have your child eyes and child mind on? You'll need them to imagine this...that all of these pieces, everywhere, are alive! They have personalities...voices and faces, arms and legs, ideas and dreams...see them? See a whole world populated with pieces of colour and shapes...bumping around, looking, trying to fit in somewhere. Some dancing, some swimming, some deep in contemplation. They're lumpy, they're sharp, they're small, they're large, they're clear, they're opaque. Some are gathered with like colours and shapes. Some look lost. Some are treated like precious gems; others are not. See them? See yourself?

Maybe we should stop there. If you like, go ahead and change back into the eyes and mind and heart that you usually wear. Although you tried to put aside your rational mind, I expect that you couldn't help but make some assumptions about what these images mean, if they mean anything. And depending on your predilections and worldview, you have embraced, or felt some resistance, to them...the fantastical walking, talking tiles...the loneliness of disconnected pieces...the implied larger meaning of the mosaic.

But still, my hope is that you began to consider what it means to connect...how it happens, and for what reasons. Perhaps you can see better how it is that each of us is trying to be in meaningful relationship – part of some mosaic, or many mosaics. Born into one particular

pattern, we have tested, connected, loved, stayed or left...always searching for, and making, a life for ourselves as one thing, one being, among many others. Searching for the right pattern, searching for a good fit.

Of course, the mosaic metaphor breaks down too. For one thing, we are not cemented into one unchanging place or pattern. Being in relationship is not really about a particular mosaic, although sometimes that image is what draws us, or distances, us. Rather, we are constantly moving around, attaching ourselves here and there, looking for places that seem right, connections that feed us. Relationships are built and then fall away. We spend some time with pieces very much like us, and other times are nestled into a confusing and diverse jumble. Some attachments serve to wear off some part of us in most unwelcome fashion; other times we quite intentionally whittle off our own edges in order to make a better place for ourselves. 'Rubbing up' against others can make us polished and content, or it can send us running for survival. We are constantly in search of our place in a mosaic, but not always paying attention to the way in which we attach ourselves.

There's another place the mosaic metaphor breaks down. Relationship is not about simply placing ourselves alongside others. There's more to relationship than making yourself the right shape, or even 'helping' someone else fit in by chipping off an edge or two.

I learned when having my bath remodeled that there is not one universal grout. There are multiple colours, and the one you choose for that seemingly insignificant line between the tiles has a huge affect on the finished look. To complicate the decision, you have to choose the right consistency of grout...too sandy and it won't work in small spaces...too fine and it won't bind in the space between larger tiles. You also have to be good at mixing it. Too wet and it shrinks and cracks. Too dry and it doesn't hold. You have to pay attention.

In other words, there's more to relationship than just choosing which mosaic you want to be part of and which pieces you want to be surrounded by. Relationship is about the space between us...how we fill it that space, in reciprocity and mutuality...and how we connect through it. It's about the quality of the grout that we mix, and smooth, to connect us, and hold us together.

Rev. Liefert suggests that the grout is made out of time we spend together...in worship, in service, in ritual, in fellowship, in the sharing of joys and sorrows. I think he's right, in that such things hold us together in a community built on familiarity and shared history. But while this may create an intact mosaic, it doesn't necessarily create 'relationships.'

By my lights, relationships are about the quality of the space between us; to willfully attend to the quality of that space requires focused intention. Relationship is more than positioning ourselves next to others; relationship is about relating...a verb...an action...and right relationship is based on a particular spirit of relating. What spirit do you want to imbue into that grout? Our UU principles call us to relate, actively, to one another...with justice, equity and compassion. Relationships based in such high values as these don't just happen. They are a process that takes ongoing practice, courage, vulnerability, forgiveness. In crucial ways, right relationship is the hardest and most important thing we can do. And, it is also the most simple, the most pure.

A therapist might tell you that it's important to find a healthy balance between self and others. A Buddhist would tell you that right relationship is found in wanting only happiness for the other. An ethicist might tell you that, when faced with multiple possibilities, it's best to choose the path of greatest love. I leave you with the poetry of Stephen Levine with which I began, words that might speak of mixing the grout that would hold us together in right relationship.

If prayer would do it
I'd pray.
If reading esteemed thinkers would do it
I'd be halfway through the Patriarchs.
If discourse would do it
I'd be sitting with His Holiness
every moment he was free.
If contemplation would do it
I'd have translated the Periodic Table
to hermit poems, converting
matter to spirit.
If even fighting would do it
I'd already be a blackbelt.
If anything other than love could do it
I've done it already
and left the hardest for last.

May the space between us, the relationships that bless us and to which we give ourselves, be imbued with love and care. That we may live happily ever after.

May it be so. Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING *A Litany of Restoration* #576

***CLOSING WORDS** ~ *Jacob Trapp*

What is precious is you in others, others in you.
We enter into the being and lives of others, as they do into ours.
Sometimes momentarily.
Sometimes enduringly.
This is what love essentially is, to be part of one another.
In simple sympathy, in close friendship, in shared stories, in sorrow and in joy.

This is what love essentially is...to be part of one another. Go in peace, go as one in relationship, for truly you are...ever and always...

Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME