

CO-CREATING COMMUNITY – ALLELUIA!
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
MAY 5, 2018

OPENING WORDS *Come Into This Circle of Community* ~ Andrew Pakula

Come into this circle of community. Come into this sacred space.
Be not tentative. Bring your whole self!
Bring the joy that makes your heart sing.
Bring your kindness and your compassion.
Bring also your sorrow, your pain.
Bring your brokenness and your disappointments.
[Here, may the] spirit of love and mystery help us to recognize the spark of the divine that resides within each of us.
May we know the joy of wholeness.
May we know the joy of being together.

Alleluia. It is a joy to be together!

A STORY FOR ALL *We Sang You Home* ~ Richard Van Camp

CHILD DEDICATION ~ Brooke-Elizabeth Sterling Warren

For the gift of children, whose innocence and laughter keep the world young,
We give thanks

For you, our children, who are our future and the embodiment of our dreams,
We give thanks

For your energy and exuberance, for the wonder that we see in your eyes,
We give thanks

And, for reminding us of the vulnerable child within each one of us, who is also in our care and needs our love,
We give thanks!!!

READING *The Grout* ~ Marcus Hartlief

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 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 *Co-Creating Community* ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

"Houston. We have a problem."

Do you know that great scene in the Apollo 13 movie when they have to fix the spacecraft using only bits of stuff they have on board?? That mission was headed for the moon, but two days after takeoff an oxygen tank exploded, and in order to survive, the carbon dioxide removal system needed a fix that would save them.

In the movie, a team on the ground at NASA puts together a duplicate collection of all the possible stuff on board that could be used, dumps it all onto a table, and challenges themselves to make something that would work. They put together an oddly shaped box wrapped in duct tape with a hose coming out one side. It looks like a rudimentary science project gone bad, but the shuttle crew duplicates it and are able to safely return to Earth.

Co-creation at its best. Well, I'm about to dump a bunch of stuff on the table to see what we can assemble.

If you've been attending for any length of time, you know that the concept of

community...how we create it, why it matters...is my personal broken record. And today, as we begin this month's exploration of creativity, it's where I want to start...indeed, very good place to start.

Alleluia. That's the first bit.

Alleluia! Is that a word you use very often? In my world, it is most often said after a long period of anxious waiting, after much nail-biting, and is breathed out as a huge sigh of relief. In that big exhalation are also notes of gratitude and wonder. Alleluia.

The word comes pretty directly from the Hebrew, meaning Praise Yahweh, or Praise the Lord. It is used often in the book of Psalms, expressing joy and thankfulness and praise. In modern day Christian communities, many would associate this word with the Easter holidays, as some traditions abstain from saying alleluia at all during Lent, and then use it prolifically on Easter Sunday. So, folks steeped in that tradition may think of alleluia as a response to the resurrection, and to the possibility of salvation.

Alleluia. We're just putting a few things together here.

Let's return to movies. Very recently Netflix released a film called "Come Sunday." It is based on true events in the life of Carleton Pearson, an African American bishop in the Pentecostal faith, the prodigy of Oral Roberts. Rev. Pearson had a transformative spiritual experience in which he heard God's voice...a voice telling him that all are saved. Nearly overnight he became a Universalist, which led to the collapse of his 5000-member church and to his removal from the ranks of Pentecostalism. True story. Rev. Pearson lives in Tulsa, OK, and regularly preaches at one of our congregations, All Souls Unitarian. Many of his congregants followed him there.

Alleluia. There's another piece. And here's another.

Recently Meredith Hill asked to borrow one of my books by Rita Nakashima Brock, a feminist Christian theologian. Pulling that book off the shelf reminded me of how transformative its message was for me while in seminary. I've even kept an art project based on it. The book is called *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. Great title, eh? Wondering what Christology is? Simply, it's the study of Christ, but in my opinion, that is much too narrow a definition. We can enlarge it to think of Christology as the study of that which saves us...the study of all that which has saving qualities.

To be saved, capital S, is used by *some* rather like the Stars on Sneetches in the Dr. Seuss book that the youth read last week. Either you've got a star on you, or you don't. And the ones with 'stars on thars' are somehow better. They are the saved.

But everything changes when you believe that we are already 'saved'...that no stars exist that can ever make any one of us as more worthy than another. And it changes when we truly believe that no one NEEDS saving, at least in that particular way.

But we all do need saving, right? Sometimes? We all need to call Houston sometimes because we have problems we can't handle alone. We are saved by a good Samaritan, by a friend, by a surgery, or by a recovery program. Just as we use Alleluia! in our

everyday vocabulary, we often say ‘thanks, you saved my life’ in those moments when someone catches something we’re about to drop, or takes an unmanageable task off our hands, or makes something possible for us, or offers some words of encouragement. Just about every day we need some kind of saving, and just about every day, we are saved.

What we should throw out, in my view, is any notion of salvation that’s seen as necessary because of WHO we are, or WHAT we are. As a bumper sticker says, I believe that we were “Born Right the First Time.” But we do need salvation from anything that would limit us, or make us feel that we are not whole or loved, or anything that would keep us down. We need salvation from particularly stuck places, or narrow perspectives, or dark nights. We need salvation from those negative messages that swirl around inside of us. We need salvation from forces of evil and injustice. We need salvation from anything that would separate us from the truth that we are enough just as we are, and that we are beloved.

What Brock expresses so beautifully in her book on Christology is a belief that we are saved through the experience of connection...a salvation from loneliness, from individualism, from brokenness, from separation, from ideologies of us-them. She says that Christ-energy is found in community...in the energy within our connections...not from some outside power that swoops in and fixes us, but from what is found between and among us.

Alleluia.

And here’s where that grout metaphor comes in.

A carbon monoxide removal system is not any old configuration of bits of stuff. A mosaic is not just a pile of broken pieces of glass and ceramic. There has to be something that holds the parts together...a design, some duct tape, some glue, some grout.

And community is not just any collection of bodies. Community has to be co-created. Community has to be built. The art project I did based on Brock’s book uses a line from a Sandra Cisneros poem... “This well-beingness I would set on a Corinthian column.” Our wellbeing is based on something we build. But, there has to be something that holds it together, something that binds us. So what is that?

Well, I don’t think it’s any one thing or any one way to do it.

When I was a little girl, we lived in a parsonage next to the church, which meant that much of our front yard was a gravel parking lot. I used to play in the puddles, and would find bits of limestone that I could crush into powder, and I would mix that powder with water, pretending that I was making a concoction that had magical healing properties for scrapes and cuts. My potions looked a lot like grout...but grout is actually more complicated than that. Grout’s made up of a carefully balanced combination of calcium, silicon, aluminum, iron and other ingredients like limestone, shells, shale, clay, slate, or silica sand.

There's a story in this month's theme packet about Creator making this planet. She goes to her pantry and takes a pinch of something from each of many jars. Daffodils and puppies and pizza. Ladybugs, butterflies and fire ants. Oceans and seas, clear lakes, waterfalls, and mud puddles. Human beings of many kinds. Change. Sadness. Hope. Schools and universities, churches and temples. The smells of hyacinths and freshly mown grass. Freedom.

Alleluia.

So it is with the grout of community. It takes a lot of different ingredients brought by many different folks. Open minds and loving hearts. Helping hands. Commitment. Intention. Vulnerability. Risk. Time.

What else can you name that we need for community to happen? For the kind of community that is saving? *Truth, Love, Forgiveness, Openness, Courage, etc.*

The folks on the ground at NASA couldn't just gather a bunch of stuff and hope that somehow it would do the necessary task. An artist can't just pile up some broken glass and hope it forms itself into a mosaic. A community is not formed just because a group of people happen to be together at the same time.

We need real, deep, loving community. Co-created, organic, messy community. It was Kurt Vonnegut who said that "...the most daring thing [we can do] is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured."

And Jessica Rodela, my colleague in Waterloo, recently posted these words on Facebook as part of a larger story. She said: "Here's to salvation through the power of Unitarian Universalism and a community that believed in me before I dared believe in myself. This faith saved me."

If there to be salvation in the connections to be found between and among us, it happens because of quality and consistency of the grout that connects us. Grout that we mix and make together. If you believe, as I do, that there is something salvific in community...if you believe that community is a key force in this planet's health and future... let's make that grout! Bring on the ingredients! If you are blessed with community, know its healing power, and want to make that healing available to others...if you have found something saving in this community...then I invite you to consciously, intentionally, lovingly help to create it. Right here. Right now.

This faith saves me. You save me. Every day. Alleluia.

READING *Community Means Strength ~ Starhawk*

We are all longing to go home to some place
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands

will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength

that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

May this be such a place.

***CLOSING WORDS**

Our Connection to Each Other and This Community Remains ~ Kathy A Huff

Our time in this place may have ended, but our connection to each other and this community remains.

Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, tread gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion.

(Let this be the vision of community that we create together.)

Until we meet again, blessed be.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME