

“Building the Beloved Community”  
By Kim D. Wilson  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos  
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There’s a long-standing Unitarian Universalist tradition in which ministers take two months off during the summer –one for vacation and one for study leave. How this tradition got started, I don’t know. Of course, ministers need some time off, and it’s very valuable to have time to read, study and reflect. But two months is a long time.

When I came back in September, it felt to me like I’d been gone for a very long time. Some of you told me you felt that way, too.

When I first arrived a year ago, I opened my heart to all of you in a way I had never done before with a congregation. And I felt you opening your hearts to me in a way I had never experienced with a congregation. We developed a positive, mutually trusting, respectful and caring relationship. We really connected in a positive way. And then, like the scene where Cinderella is dancing at the royal ball, the clock began to toll. It was midnight and Cinderella had to leave. This past June, on the 30<sup>th</sup>, it was noon and I had to leave. Oh, by the way, I think I lost a size 8 ½ glass slipper...

So I did what we had agreed upon. But, I think because of the length of time, I couldn’t help feeling like I was abandoning you all. In fact, I had been working with a number of members who were experiencing various issues in their lives, and it really felt artificial to say, “OK, well I can help you today, but after that, I will still care about you, I just won’t be involved whatsoever in your life until September, when I will come back.”

It turns out that I’m not the only minister feeling that this is not the best way to do ministry. Quite a few congregations have shifted to a different model in which the minister takes blocks of time off, but they’re shorter and spread out. It may be that we want to look at doing something different. That’s a conversation for another day. But I’ll come back to this subject in a minute.

I want to say a few words about the retreat last weekend. First of all, I want to thank all the people who were involved –our Retreat Planning Team, all the volunteers who helped out, the workshop leaders, and all of you who were able to be there and participate. The focus of the two main workshops was healthy relationships, including our relationships with each other. In our final exercise, we broke up into small groups and generated lists of statements regarding what people were willing to promise to one another.

What we were actually doing was beginning the process of creating a Covenant Statement, which begins something like, “We, the members and friends of UUF, covenant to...” And the members of the small groups were thoughtful, insightful, and took the work very seriously. I was quite impressed. They came up with lists of statements. I’d like to share just a couple from each group:

- Be respectful
- Communicate openly and directly with the individual(s) with whom we have an issue
- Recognize each person’s needs and limitations
- Give all a chance to talk
- Give feedback directly and avoid triangulation
- Practice the golden rule
- Understand each other before making a case for our own points of view
- Acknowledge people for the actions they take that contribute value to the group

The work of creating a congregation-wide Covenant Statement is an exciting project and will be ongoing this year; everyone will have a chance to contribute to it. More on that soon.

As you can see, the title of my sermon for today is, “Building the Beloved Community.” And those who participated in the retreat were working on exactly that. Being intentional about our relationships with each other, moving toward the goal of the Beloved Community.

The Beloved Community is a concept that was central to Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior’s preaching and civil rights work. King’s vision was of a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood would

be an actuality in all of social life. In his mind, such a community would be the ideal expression of the Christian faith. (Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr.)

At the core of the concept of King's Beloved Community was "agape," a Greek word for love. He described the Greek idea of agape as "...goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous [and] unmotivated" and "the love of God operating in the human heart." He added, "Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes," and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community."

All week, I've been asking myself, "What do people need to hear on Sunday? How can I talk to them about this behavioral covenant idea without sounding...preachy?" And I realized that something felt "off." It didn't seem like the right time to be focusing on how we can work toward treating each other better. You know, "Let's improve, rah, rah!" And then I realized why I had this nagging feeling. I've been away for so long and it feels like I've just come back. I realized that maybe what you all need to hear from me today instead is some kind of reassurance. Reassurance that I do really care for every one of you. For exactly who you are, in all your complexity. I have compassion and love for each person here, and all of our members and friends who are part of our community. I'm so grateful to be a part of this community.

A number of people at the retreat expressed that the idea of feeling the kind of love and compassion that Dr. King spoke of seemed difficult if not impossible for them. There was a time when it was hard for me to feel love or compassion for anyone outside my own family. Well, even inside my own family.

I can't tell anyone how to get to a place where you can love others as human beings, "for their sakes," as Dr. King put it. I can share some insights from several people who have influenced me, and I can tell you a little bit about some of the key experiences that helped shape both my self-concept and my understanding of my relationship with the rest of humanity. And with some of these experiences, I want to tell you, I had to push myself to the limit, and I was anxious and scared and cried and had to look at places inside myself that I didn't really want to spend time in.

The thing was, I really wanted to be a minister –I wanted to be a good minister, and so I was willing to do whatever it took. And I had a lot of growing to do.

I was involved with a UU congregation as a young adult. I've lived in many different places, and I'm not going to mention which congregation this was.

But there were two people there whom I actively avoided. One was an older woman, who had long hairs on her chin, which I thought was gross. The other was a younger woman with unkempt hair and old clothing. She didn't always smell so good, either. And I found her behavior to be odd.

Looking back on my early adult experiences in a congregation, I can see now that I was very insecure about my own appearance and behavior. Naturally, I would be judgmental about the appearance and the behavior of others. I didn't know that in order to accept others, I first had to accept myself.

In her book, Cultivating Wholeness, Margaret Kornfeld offers the following insight about Jewish and Christian communities: "Both... acknowledge that those in their communities are able to love and accept each other and to care for the world *because God first loved them.*"

As I've mentioned before, I used to be very hard on myself. As I began the ministerial formation process, I worked on self-acceptance, flaws and all, but it wasn't easy, and a part of me wasn't really "with the program." I had begun experimenting with prayer, and one night, I had an epiphany. I had already worked out for myself a naturalistic theism so I had begun using the word "God" in a way that worked for me. I thought: "Wait –God's love is unconditional. If God loves and accepts me exactly as I am, then who am I to question that?" I was struck by my own arrogance.

That sudden insight put the first real chink in my armor, and for the first time in my adult life, I was able to be more gentle with myself and more forgiving of my imperfections. As I began to love and accept myself for who I am, I found that I was a lot more tolerant of others' imperfections and differences.

One of the biggest hurdles for ministry students is what's called CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education. It's a supervised student chaplaincy program, usually in a

hospital setting. I chose the Lehigh Valley Hospital, which is a Level One trauma center. People came in with all sorts of injuries. I had to offer comfort to families whose loved ones' lives hung in the balance, and to spouses whose partners had died, to parents whose children had died and a child who lived but was paralyzed. I had to offer comfort to an injured child whose drunken mother crashed the car. We talked a lot about the importance of our presence, which is often all we have to offer.

I also visited patients who were sick –sick with heart conditions, with cancer, with blood infections, all kinds of diagnoses –or no diagnosis. I remember one man probably in his 40's, lying on his bed, barely able to speak and there was dried spittle all around his mouth. The doctors didn't know what was wrong with him. A month ago he had been fine, he said. Suddenly, I was able to look beyond the unpleasantness of his mouth, his unshaven face, his greasy hair. I saw him as he must have looked only weeks before. A healthy, good-looking young man.

For 12 weeks, 5 days a week plus overnight on-calls, I saw raw humanity. I saw people suffering. I had to be with them in their suffering. Even when I wanted to run away. Even when it felt like too much. You cannot go through an experience like that and not be changed. For me, in many ways, it leveled the playing field. It doesn't matter who you are –being human means that we may have to endure extreme suffering. No one is immune from that possibility.

I also had to learn to have compassion for the people I spent time with, families and patients alike, no matter how they looked, how they behaved, or how they smelled. I think you can understand that it was not easy.

The thing that probably had the most profound transformative effect on my feeling of connectedness and commonality with the rest of humanity was my lovingkindness meditation practice, which I did for 6 or 7 years. In this kind of meditation practice, we gently repeat phrases that are meaningful in terms of what we wish, first for ourselves, and then for others, such as, "May I be filled with lovingkindness, may I be well, may I be peaceful and at ease, may I be happy." Then we repeat them for "you," as in "May you be filled with lovingkindness" and finally, for "all," "May all be filled with lovingkindness."

Becoming able to generate a feeling of love and compassion for our fellow humans is a process –an ongoing process. As some of the participants in the retreat noted, we begin by cultivating an attitude of tolerance and acceptance, and from there, we mindfully move toward more loving relationships with each other.

Oh, the woman with the chin hairs? Fabulous person. She ultimately became a role model for the kind of woman I want to be when I'm in my 90's. And the other woman? I let her into my heart, too, and when she mentioned that she needed a bed for one of her kids, I gave her an extra one of mine.

May you all be filled with lovingkindness  
May you all be well  
May you all be peaceful and at ease  
May you all be happy.

Blessed be.