

“Right Relations and the Beloved Community”
by Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
February 3, 2013

There’s an old folk tale which I’ve adapted slightly for today. The elderly chief of an African village is dying. He calls all of the children together and says, “I want you to go into the forest and collect a bundle of sticks. When you have found them, bring them to me.”

So the children collect the sticks, and give them to the old man. He calls the entire village together and gives a stick to each person. “Break the stick,” he instructs them. With some effort, they all break their sticks in half.

“This is how it is when a soul is alone without anyone. They can be easily broken.”

The old man next gives each member of the community another stick. He tells them, “Put your sticks together in bundles. Now, break these bundles in half.”

No one can break the sticks when they’re bundled together. The old man smiles. “This is how I would like you to live after I pass on. We are strong when we stand together. When we are with one another, we cannot be broken.”

There is power in community. Power to accomplish. Power to create change. Power to support and nurture one other. As Starhawk says, in community there is “strength to join **our** strength to do the work that needs to be done.” Any group of people that joins together for a common purpose is a community of sorts.

In the act of gathering here today, by being a member, a friend or a new acquaintance of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos, we have created a particular kind of community. A community of faith. Here, in this community, we come hoping to connect with like-minded people, hoping for acceptance, seeking greater understanding. We want to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

As we hold up the ideal of unity, we also strive to break down the walls that separate us from others. My colleague Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn says, “Our job as individuals and as members of a community of faith is to create here a safe place for people together...to be nurtured and loved... We try to create here one of

the few places where we are all safe. The quirky and the earthy, the grounded and the groundless... we should all be able to check our armor at the door when we come to church, to our sanctuary from the world as it is, and enter this place where we try to create a microcosm of the world as it ought to be. Here we can put our weapons of self-defense away or even leave them at home.”

To spend time in the company of other people who share our concerns, values, interests and beliefs is to receive confirmation of who we are –“to feel connected to a larger image of ourselves,” as Unitarian Universalist writer Robert Fulghum says.

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we often speak of the “Beloved Community.” “The Beloved Community” is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th century by the philosopher and theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning.

For Dr. King, “the Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony.” Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal, on a global scale. “In his [vision of the] Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness [would] not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination...[would] be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood...Love and trust [would] triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice [would] prevail over war and military conflict.” (The King Center)

At the core of the concept of King’s Beloved Community was agape love. King distinguished among three kinds of love, known in the Greek as: “eros,” which is aesthetic or romantic love; “philia,” translated as “affection between friends” and “agape,” which he described as “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all,” an “overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative”...“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.”

Our UU principles describe a model of the kind of beloved community we hope to find here. A place where we uphold the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

Where we practice justice, equity and compassion. A place of acceptance, where we encourage each other in our spiritual growth and respect each other's freedom to search for truth and meaning. Where we respect the right of each person's conscience and thus use a democratic process in our decision-making. A place of peace, liberty and justice. A place where we respect our interdependence with all that is.

We, including myself, tend to skip over the words at very beginning of the list of principles. But they're important. The Principles begin: "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, **covenant** to affirm and promote..." and the seven principles follow. The Principles are a covenant. When we covenant to do our best to affirm and promote the ideals of a Beloved Community here, we are, in essence agreeing among ourselves how we will be together, how we will treat one another. We are a voluntary association, and as such, going along with any kind of agreement such as a covenant is also voluntary.

Lord John Fletcher Moulton was a British juror in the early 20th century who saw that behavior could be divided into three different domains: The first is the domain of law, where, he said, "our actions are prescribed by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed." At the other extreme is the domain of free choice, which, he said, "includes all those actions as to which we claim and enjoy complete freedom."

The area of action between law and pure personal choice, Moulton called "the domain of obedience to the unenforceable." It includes moral duty, social responsibility and good manners, but it extends beyond these to include "all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself."

The domain of "obedience to the unenforceable" is that area of our lives where we act or refrain from acting, not because we are forced to (the domain of law) and not because we have the freedom to do what we feel like doing, but because we understand that it is right, and so we discipline ourselves to do so. As communities of faith that share similar values, this third domain of behavior is where we expect each other to practice behaviors of this middle territory. It is from within this realm of the middle territory that we develop a covenant of how we will be together.

If we were to boil down "obedience to the unenforceable" into a single sentence, we might use what we call the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

So, in a community of faith, in the Beloved Community, we sometimes talk about “right relations” as a way of walking the walk of the Golden Rule. What would some of these ways of being in right relationship look like? I recently saw a list of 25 “Agreements” that one congregation developed.

Here are SOME examples of what is meant by “right relations,” and I’m sure we could think of more:

1. Think the best of others.
2. Listen.
3. Be inclusive.
4. Avoid gossip.
5. Speak kindly.
6. Give and accept praise.
7. Respect others’ opinions.
8. Mind your body.
9. Respect even a subtle “no.”
10. Apologize.
11. Assert yourself.
12. Refrain from idle complaints.
13. Don’t shift responsibility and blame.

A religious community is like a simmering soup, and we are the soup-makers. The community is never static; it is always being stirred, always moving, always in formation. We are constantly creating and re-creating the community. We are always becoming, like a soup that continues to have things added to it: a few more carrots, a little parsley, maybe a dash of salt...

I’ve been talking about this ideal of the Beloved Community, and it’s exactly that. An ideal. An actual Beloved Community is never perfect, and perhaps paradoxically, that’s the way it’s supposed to be. I might describe a religious community as a crucible for personal and spiritual growth. Never perfect, but always growing and changing.

We bring our selves to this community, all of our selves. Our talents and gifts, our strengths, our personalities, the things we have learned from our families and from our experiences along life’s path. We come as we are: imperfect, all raised in imperfect families; we bring our hurts and our wounds, our ways of coping with the hands we have been dealt.

As in any relationship, in our communities of faith we are sometimes challenged by our differences. There will be discomfort. There will be conflict. There are also opportunities to learn and practice new ways of responding, to grow beyond the ways of reacting that we learned in our families of origin or in our earlier adult relationships.

In my younger days, I was not confident. As I've mentioned before, I was a perfectionist, but inside I felt like a fake. I believed that I was so imperfect, that if people knew the "real" me, they wouldn't like what they saw. I was also very judgmental of others. I now understand that those things that I intensely disliked in other people were the very characteristics I couldn't stand in myself. I now know that what I was doing was what is sometimes referred to as "projecting my shadow side." That's the side of ourselves we would rather hide. It was too painful to look at my **own** flaws, so instead I unconsciously focused on those same flaws in other people.

Now that I know this, it can be very annoying. So if I react negatively to what someone else says or does (or fails to say or do), I hear a little voice that says, OK, Kim, now what does that say about you?

I find helpful the concept that Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote about: the idea of the wounded healer. We are all wounded –that is simply part of being human. And because of our common wounded humanity, if we are able to transcend our own pain and open our hearts, we find within ourselves empathy and compassion flowing out to others. In this way, within the Beloved Community, our Beloved Community, we can help each other to heal our wounds.

When each of us was born, it was a miracle. Each of us was beautiful; each of us was innocent. The world had not yet left its marks on us. It's not difficult to see the spark of divinity in a baby.

Within each of us resides an innocent baby. Within each of us resides a spark of divinity. Would you please turn for just a moment to the person next to you. Do you see that innocent babe? Can you see that spark of divinity?

Now, close your eyes for a moment. Let's take a deep breath. In the Beloved Community, we need to remember to breathe.

May this community be "a circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free."