

“Deconstructing Individualism, Building Authentic Community”

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That’s kind of a humbling image, isn’t it? Imagining ourselves as a bunch of dirty potatoes being stirred around in a pot. In fact, I bet most of us are trying hard NOT to associate ourselves with this image. Maybe it rubs us the wrong way. (Ha, ha.) I don’t usually attempt to mind-read. I’ve heard that’s a good way to get into trouble. But I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest that a different image would be more appealing (oh, sorry, that was another terrible pun). Something like this: if we are potatoes at all, we’re washed and scrubbed clean, lying side by side on a clean kitchen towel, close to each other but not actually touching.

Now, why would we tend to gravitate toward this image of separateness, even if we agree with Ian White Maher that having our minds bump up against each other is healthy for us?

The Berry Street Essay is a lecture presented to ministers each June during Ministry Days by one of our UU colleagues. Two years ago, Frederick Muir addressed a question with which practically every Unitarian Universalist has engaged: if we are who we claim to be, then why aren’t we growing as a denomination? Muir believes that a paradigm shift will be essential to our survival.

This fundamental shift in the way we understand ourselves and in turn relate to the world at large “goes deep into the history, character and epistemology of Unitarian Universalism and its members.” Before we can effectively move into the future and create a sustainable Unitarian Universalism, we must address what Muir calls “a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times.”

American culture was built on the idea of individuality but seems to have shaped Unitarian Universalism in an extreme way, to the point that Muir accuses individualism of holding us “captive.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker and the other Transcendentalists developed an individualistic theology that was a welcome alternative to the harsh predeterminism of Calvinism. It was reasonable to assert the value of the individual in response, as Emerson did in his essay, “Self Reliance,” where he said,

“Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” and, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.”

But some, including UU writer Conrad Wright, argue that the result of Emersonian individualism was “the disintegration of institutional religion [because] one cannot build a church on Emerson’s dicta: ‘men are less together than alone,’ or ‘men descend to meet.’” Wright concludes: “For both Emerson and Parker, a true community is not painfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together, but is made up of atomic and unrelated individuals ...”^[10]

Put like that, it doesn’t say much about our ability to function as a community. Is Wright overstating the case? Or are we über-individualistic? And what, exactly, is meant by “individualism?”

My colleague Don Garrett offers one interpretation.

“We start as innocent babies and children. If our parents are at all competent, we feel safe and loved. We have no need for a sense of right or wrong; we do what pleases us. Joy and sadness are simple, direct, and immediate.” We are in a kind of perfect world: a garden of Eden. “And then, at some point, everyone has the shocking, bewildering, shattering experience of being hit by a load of bricks in the form of, “No! Don’t do that!” And although we’re punished in some way for our disobedience, the most significant punishment is the loss of our parents’ unconditional acceptance and love.” It’s a frightening experience. We no longer feel as safe as we once did. No more paradise.

We learn to watch ourselves in ways we never needed to do before. We learn to watch our parents to anticipate and avoid their disapproval.

This leads to the creation of a defensive sense of self, of an “I” to whom things happen. When we are scolded or punished, we tend to internalize our parents’ disapproval and feel shame. These feelings then play out through other spheres of life. Children act out these experiences, judging and mocking each other at home, at school and on the playground.

And so children learn to defend themselves in a variety of ways, whether through aggression or withdrawal, humor or persuasion. But every step of the way strengthens and reinforces the fear-based, defensive sense of self that emerged with their expulsion from the paradise of their infancy.

Variously called “the divided self,” double-consciousness,” or the “false self,” this defensive sense of self views anything non-self as “other.” Individualism is the persistent conviction that I am separate from you and you are separate from me.

This conviction leaves us trapped in a paradise lost, seeking and longing for a wholeness that we can never achieve until we acknowledge that we have divided ourselves in two; the authentic self and the false self. Our authentic self is the fearless part of ourselves, the part that is open-hearted and non-defensive. The false self is fearful and defensive, and can so dominate our consciousness that it can actually hide our authentic self from our own awareness.

So it’s the false, defensive self that creates the separation, the sense that we are individuals separated from each other. But it feels like we are individuals, with our own separate thoughts and opinions. We experience a sense of self. Doesn’t that mean that individualism is just a part of being human?

Well...no. Actually, any concept of self is socially constructed. We are who we are because of the connections in life that have formed us, shaped us, protected us, and defined us. Because we are so steeped in our own Western society’s understandings, it can be difficult to comprehend any other way of being in a societal group. We take it for granted that we have individual rights, and that we might not be willing to sacrifice our own self-interest to benefit the larger group. Some societies are group oriented, in other words, the well-being of the group takes precedence over one’s personal needs or wants. In societies like these, any tendencies to show a defensive sense of self would be strongly discouraged.

As our American society becomes more and more individualistic, so does our denomination. This is why the ideal of the Beloved Community is so profoundly important today, especially for Unitarian Universalists. I’ve talked about this before, so if you were here, AND listening AND have a good memory, you may remember that the concept of the Beloved Community was popularized by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The phrase was authored by Josiah Royce, a scholar familiar to King’s teachers at Boston University School of Theology where King completed his doctoral work.

While Muir admits to not being an Emerson scholar, he feels certain that Emerson “celebrated nature’s differences and diversity, of which humans are a part” in a way that was positive and refreshing to 19th-century Americans. I agree. But, as Muir says, “We - as a nation and as a religious community - took the blessing and

joy of individuality and made it an ideology, made it a theology, and we did a very bad job of making it polity.”

He adds, “While individualism may have been a bold and appealing way to create and build a nation and its institutions, and to grow Unitarian Universalism, it is not sustaining: individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we have committed ourselves. There is little to nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.”

You know the seven Principles? Well, I think almost no one knows them by heart, but you know about them. But have you ever noticed the opening statement? Let’s open our hymnals, past the title page, past the table of contents, past the preface, and turn one more page and you should see our principles. Let’s read together the opening statement in all caps. WE, THE MEMBER CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, COVENANT TO AFFIRM AND PROMOTE –OK, we can stop right there.

Notice that word, “covenant?” Covenant is a commitment, a pledge, a promise. So, as Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles. We agree to do our best. Universalist Hosea Ballou said, “If we agree together in love, no disagreement can do us any harm.”

Frederick Muir, in his Berry Street Address, expresses his conviction that “covenant can shape the Beloved Community, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden and deepen all.”

The Rev. Shirley Strong says, “I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places, and things—a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions.” Beloved Community holds at its core the promise to one another of our mutual trust and support.

Despite our individualism, we all want and need deep, rewarding, compassionate relationships. And although we might not all express it the same way, I think we long to be part of a Beloved Community that is both religious and spiritual, that seeks wholeness and kindness and love.

The divided, defended self expresses itself in a multitude of ways: anger, urgency, anxiety, competitiveness, resentment, shame, guilt and hatred. When our words and actions are motivated by these fear-based feelings, “we are neither true to the ideals of our Beloved Community nor can we be truly effective in the transformation of the world into the kind of place we imagine when we sing Spirit of Life.” (Garrett)

Over and over, spiritual wisdom tells us that it is only in setting aside our defenses, stepping away from our false, divided, defensive self, that we can approach the divine, the spirit of love, that which is larger than ourselves. “The false self cannot really conceive of the divine dimension of transcendent love because it cannot imagine anything larger than itself.” (Garrett)

And it is only in having the courage to step away from our defenses that we are able to engage in deep covenantal community life. Muir says, “The vision of a deep covenantal community life as named in our Principles is bold and many of us...recite our Principles with passion and pride as we testify, march and talk with newcomers. What is vital is committing to this expression of our faith not...from the narrow goal of individualism, but the promise of covenant and Beloved Community.”

How would we live together if we had no need for defenses? What if we had no fear, no anger? Could we feel completely safe with one another, totally committed to being together in trusting understanding and love?

Here’s where the sweeping crescendo of harp music comes in...

Wait for it.... OK, no. This is not possible. Why not? Why can’t we just chuck our need for defenses, all our fear and anger and feel completely safe and totally committed and trusting? Oh, yeah, we’re human.

And where was that class where we all learned how to live fearlessly, without anger, and complete trust in the universe? I don’t know about you, but I definitely missed that class. And the class on how to have completely healthy relationships with everyone? I missed that one. How about you?

A covenant of Beloved Community takes into account the fact that in a lot of ways, we have no idea what we’re doing. We’re ordinary people with good hearts. But someone says or does something. Someone else’s feelings are hurt. Now we have a conflict. What do we do about that? Someone does something and forgets to tell

someone else, who will be affected. That someone else gets upset. What do we do about that?

Imagine if, in order to become a Unitarian Universalist, you had to lie down on a bed for a few hours, hooked up to an IV line. Let's say that IV bag contains everything you need in order to always be kind, considerate, generous, appreciative, respectful and compassionate. Once the bag has finished emptying its contents into your system, the minister comes over, gently removes the needle from your arm, and puts a sticker on your chest saying, "I'm a UU and I'm perfect!"

You may laugh, but do we not have this idea that somehow we're supposed to already know how to treat each other and do it perfectly? And if we do it perfectly, there will never be any conflict? What if, as Ian White Maher suggests, what if conflicts and uncomfortable conversations are just as much a part of the fabric of the Beloved Community as the sweet and loving exchanges? That our minds have to bump together like potatoes in a pot?

And so, where does that leave us? We didn't get that IV treatment. We didn't get that sticker that guarantees we will be perfect. What if we simply committed to learning together, here at UUFP? Learning how to become better at communicating with each other. Learning how to set aside our defenses. Learning how deal with our hurt feelings, our resentments, our disappointments. How to apologize, how to let go and forgive. How to share of ourselves deeply and how to listen deeply and without judgment to another person. These things are not easy. But with the right tools, they will become easier.

I'm asking the Finance Committee to create a line item in next year's budget for workshops so that we can learn and grow together in all of these ways as a Beloved Community. I've already started talking with several workshop leaders from different organizations as well as UU folks. (Highly trained workshops leaders deserve to be adequately compensated, and if we want to have someone from, say, the Compassionate Listening Project come for the day, they will need to be paid for their work.)

Are we willing, individually and collectively, to make a commitment to learning and growing together as part of our covenant of Beloved Community?

I invite you to walk with me on this exciting journey. In every relationship, every communication, every plan, every meeting ---we can celebrate our joyful

commitment to embody within our walls the kind of world we want to build for everyone. May it be so.

My gratitude to Rev. Don Garrett for some of the material on individualism.