

# *Living a Life of Connection*

*Small Groups: September 2013*

Unitarian Universalist Minister Scott Tayler describes the mission of Unitarian Universalism as the work of creating connection. He says, “we are a religion that sees people struggling, not against our own sinful souls, but against a shallow, frantic and materialistic world that all-too-often leaves us disconnected from our deepest selves, life’s gifts and needs greater than our own.” He describes this state as being “spiritually disconnected,” in other words disconnected from our deeper understandings of being and meaning, and increasingly from our humanity and our compassion. The work of this congregation, indeed our mission, is to help all of us heal this disconnect by inviting each other into lives of connection.

One of the first steps toward spiritual connection begins with making authentic connections with others. About three years ago, at a Small Group Ministry facilitator’s session, the topic was friendship. Ruth Braunstein, one of UUUCP’s Small Group Leaders, talked about a friend she has had for over 60 years. They met when they were 12 and 13 years old and have nurtured a lifelong friendship. She talked about what a gift it is to have a long time friend - someone who has known you through all the many stages of your life..

As she shared, I thought of my own friend - someone I have known for more than 25 years. All these years, we seen each other through difficulty and joy; watched each other grow from crazy teens, to the complexity of young adulthood, and now into marriage, profession and motherhood. There were times I took our friendship for granted. Until that small group meeting, I never thought about how rare a long friendship is - or how precious. Since that small group, I have given more care and attention to this relationship, being mindful to stay in touch and nurture it - for true friendship it is a beautiful gift. It’s also helped me be more mindful of the gift of my other friendships and significant relationships.

How easy it is to take the people we love - our partners, friends, parents, for granted

How easy it is to put more of our attention and energy into material concerns or into our work. Sometimes we just expect that the people we love know we love them and that at some later time we will devote more attention to those relationships. But if we are honest with ourselves, it is the relationships of love and care, trust and friendship, that make life precious and worthwhile. Which is more important - what is our true treasure? Is it our work, or is it our friends and loved ones?

This month, in worship and small groups, we'll be looking at what it means to live lives of connection. At UUCP, Small Groups are one of the most profound ways we have to get connected to others, for hearing another's story can help us understand our own better. Yours in love,

Rev. Susan

## *Living the Theme: Engaging Connection*

We are relational beings. Choose one of the exercises below to focus your mind on the important connections and relationships in your life, past and/or present

### Exercise # 1

Think about a time when someone else really made a difference in your life. Some of us talk about a time someone "saved our lives" by being a friend, sharing with us an important lesson, or supporting us through a difficult time. Remember the situation and reflect on why it made a difference. Is the person still a part of your life? Consider taking some time to write about that experience. If you are artistically inclined, think about drawing a picture of the person or some other drawing that represents the experience.

### Exercise # 2

Give some thought to the people who are most important in your life, the relationships of family or friends that really matter to you. Next time you see or talk to one of these people, take time to tell them how much they mean to you.

### Exercise # 3

Write a handwritten note to someone you have not spoken to for a while but who you think of positively often. Think about how you might reconnect to that person. You do not have to mail the note.

### Exercise # 4

Is there a place where you especially feel connected to life or nature. It might be a place in your backyard, a hike you love, or just a place in the city or your own home where you experience a feeling of connection. Make time this month to visit that place and spend some time there.

## *Some Questions to Think and Talk About*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- 1. To what degree does our individual identity, dignity and sense of self arise out of relatedness?** Mab Segrest says: "The South African word *ubuntu* expresses the African idea that our human dignity and fulfillment is dependent upon our links to each other in community." Similarly, UU Minister Myke Johnson says: "We start out in relationship, and our individuality grows out of that circle of relatedness. Not the other way around."
- 2. Who really knows you? Who do you really know? Is being known the same as connection?** UU Minister Kathleen McTigue tells a story of the inscription on the tombstone of one Franklin F. Bailey, who lived from 1901 to 1988 in New England: "Here lies a man that nobody really knew." Could this happen here? Could this happen to you?
- 3. Are there important connections you have to "things" or "experiences" rather than just people?** Do you cry or laugh at a movie? Do you feel especially connected to something in nature? What are some of your favorite connections with a piece of art or song or story or play? Why is this connection so strong for you? Why is the connection so strong for humans?
- 4. Does being in community, does being connected help us live into truer versions of ourselves?** Lynn Ungar says the main reason people come to church, any church, is for community. But church community is/should be different: "Church community is based not just in who we are, but also in who we want to become." The purpose of church community is to get ahold of people like us and change us. Not into some false version of ourselves—but into a truer version of ourselves."

5. **How are social media connections adding to the ways people connect? How are these “virtual” or online connections similar to face to face connections? Are there ways they are different?** Dr. Mizuko Ito says “smartphones in the classroom are ‘weapons of mass distraction,’” but goes on to defend today’s youth culture as just a different way to connect, not better or worse, and that today’s young people learn more individually than (say) you and I did.
6. **Are there rituals or routines that help you experience connection? What are some of the rituals of your life? How do they form “connections” for you? How does repetition build connections? Can individual rituals be as important or sacred as communal rituals?** In her Horizons column, Anne Byrne, UUCP Director of Children’s Ministries says that rituals help to connect us and help make concrete for our children (and all of us) the more abstract beliefs of Unitarians Universalists.
7. **Reflecting on your own days and routine, how well do you balance tending to work, chores, tasks, distractions compared to tending your relationships, with others and with yourself?**
8. Carl Jung, a student of Sigmund Freud’s, talked about “the collective unconscious.” His proof included the concept of archetypes in literature and dreams, such as the “rite of initiation” and the color “green” representing the life force. He found evidence of these symbols across cultures and time. **Does this “prove” connection to you? Why or why not? What does a “collective unconscious” mean “ what are the implications for us?**
9. Many of us have friends that live far away or that we don’t see often; yet within minutes of being in one another’s company again, we “pick up right where we left off.” Do you have friends or family like that? **Are “reconnections” as good as or better than “connections”?** How are they alike? What makes them different?
10. **Have there been connections that you have lost or that have changed in your life? Are there relationships or connections you have to people or places that hold difficulty or pain?** Friendship and family and good relationships are a source of joy in life, but sometimes we also hold difficult connections, or the pain of lost connections and carry those in our hearts as well.

## *Additional Resources*

These are not required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

### **First Thoughts and Wise Words**

#### **connection** *noun*

: something that joins or connects two or more things

: the act of connecting two or more things or the state of being connected

: a situation in which two or more things have the same cause, origin, goal, etc.

"Evil is the capacity within and among us to break sacred connection within ourselves, with each other, and with the Holy, and further, to deny this breakage or to call it a virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear and delusion -- mainly self-delusion. Sunlight beats it back. Humility stunts its growth. Truth telling, truth seeking, truth speaking, secret-breaking, brave naming, bearing witness -- all weaken its resolve and threaten its potential. Saying and singing and teaching to children, and carving into stone from time to time the words, *Here happened an event upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent* -- that is good practice. This is how connection begins, sacred connection, and how it is restored. This is part of what the church is for." from Victoria Safford, UU Minister, "How Does our Faith Hold Brokenness?" on commemorating a 1920's lynching in Duluth MN.

"We are called to transform the painful and harsh realities of our lives into as much beauty as we can. We are called to create mosaics known as community, as family, as congregations. And we are invited to bring our broken selves into relationship, and find ways to help each other heal." by Barbara Wells ten Hove, UU Minister.

"Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend." - Albert Camus

"We are to live together in ways that hallow the earth with peace and justice, and this power is not in the state, nor is it in money, nor does it come from the barrel of a gun. Rather, we are empowered to participated whenever we form into congregations that seek to hear and do torah; individuals can and should resist injustice, but only in community can we do justice. In an unredeemed world, we are all refugees in need of congregational sanctuary." From Jim Corbett, Quaker philosopher/rancher from his book "Sanctuary for all Life: The Cowbalah of Jim Corbett"

"One of the old ones stood up  
into the morning light  
and spoke to those who had come  
back to the river.

Now we have come again to this place.  
My life apart from you  
is not as strong. Yes,  
I have danced and I have told stories  
at my own fire and  
I have sung well, to all eight directions.  
But when I am with you,  
my friends,  
I know better  
who it is in me  
that sings.”

Barbara Pescan, UU Minister, from *Morning Watch: Meditations*

*The Greatest Gifts* by Kathy Davis

May we break boundaries, tear down walls, and build on the foundation  
of goodness inside each of us.  
May we look past differences, gain understanding, and embrace acceptance.  
May we reach out to each other, rather than resist.  
May we be better stewards of the earth, protecting nurturing and replenishing the beauties of nature.  
May we practice gratitude for all we have, rather than complain about our needs.  
May we seek cures for the sick, help for the hungry, and love for the lonely.  
May we share our talents, give our time, and teach our children.  
May we hold hope for the future very tenderly in our hearts and do all we can to build for bright tomorrows.  
And may we love with our whole hearts, for that is the only way to love.