

Belonging

A sermon by Rev. Meghan Conrad Cefalu, Given at UUCM – 3/22/09

My husband and I have a ritual of watching one episode of some old TV show on DVD each night. These days we are working our way through season two of Cheers. I'm now starting to wonder if the idea for this sermon came to me because I have had the opening theme song in my head for a number of weeks. I won't sing it for you, but the words are, "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came. You want to go where people know troubles are all the same. You want to go where everybody knows your name."

Of course, the song is referring to a neighborhood bar as the place where "everybody knows your name" but I think the idea translates just as well to a religious community like ours. There is something very appealing about being in a place where you are known and appreciated, where people are glad to see you and you are reminded of the commonality of the human condition.

I chose to explore the concept of belonging with you today because it *is* a new member Sunday. We have had a formal ritual welcoming eight people into membership with us. Now these men and women can tell their friends and family that they *belong* to the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains.

But what does that really mean? What is different now? I've been pondering the question, "***What does it mean to belong?***"

Dictionary dot com offers three variations to define the word. The first listing says, "*to be in the relation of a member*". That is pretty straightforward.

The second one says, "*to have the proper qualifications, especially social qualification to be a member of a group.*" Ah, now we are getting down to the nitty-gritty. The notion of belonging can carry an intimation of exclusion. A person either belongs to a particular group or they don't.

Suddenly I have flashbacks to my college years. I remember the way some of the sororities and fraternities would scout out the freshman in search of the right people, the ones they deemed worthy to wear their particular set of Greek letters.

Remember that great Groucho Marx quip about membership? He says, "I sent the club a wire stating, PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT ME AS A MEMBER."

Thankfully, our UU congregations do not operate this way. On the contrary, we are welcoming to all who find themselves aligned with our values of freedom, reason, and tolerance.

Which brings us to the third variation on Dictionary dot com which says that to belong is to "*be properly or appropriately placed.*" As in *the books belong on the shelf.*¹ This third definition is

the one that most resonates with me. That sense of belonging is like finding yourself at home. I have known many people who described the feeling they had discovering Unitarian Universalism for the first time in this way. They say, “I have been a UU for years, I just didn’t know it!”

I had that kind of experience the first day I walked into what would later become my seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry. I just knew I belonged in that place, with those people. I didn’t know much about Unitarian Universalism. But based on what I learned in the span of an afternoon I was certain, I mean I knew down in the center of my bones, that I had not only found a religious denomination I could belong to with my whole heart, but I had also found the new direction for my life’s work that I had been searching for.

But actually becoming a UU wasn’t as simple as that, not really. I was thrilled by the seven principles and six sources of our faith. I was delighted by the lack of creed or dogma and I was delirious with joy by the sincere welcome extended to the gay community.

On paper this was as close to perfection as any religious organization could be. But that feeling like I really belonged, like I was “properly or appropriately placed” among the people I met in the local UU church took a little bit longer to develop.

I have since learned to understand and articulate the slow progress of religious identity formation. There is a progression of steps that we all go through as our sense of being Unitarian Universalists develops. First, we come to the local congregation for personal reasons: maybe we are lonely, or in crisis or just looking to make some like-minded friends. People do not join churches because they are just dying to serve on a committee or head a task force!

Once we have been coming to services for a few months we might feel like we’d like to get a little more involved in the life of the congregation. At first our participation is somewhat self-serving. We want to do things we find really fun, like singing with the choir or planting flowers in the garden, or joining a circle supper to meet some other members.

Over time our involvement might begin to reflect our growing understanding of the bigger picture. Maybe we’ve been inspired to go to a district event or training and or we’ve read some UU history. We start to see how our local congregation fits in with the other congregations in the district. We begin to care about the liberal religious message that UUs bring to the wider world beyond the city or town we live in.

At some point our awareness might have expanded to include the national and international UU movement. Maybe we’ve been to General Assembly and gotten the chills when we stood in an auditorium with 4000 other UUs from around the country to sing “Spirit of Life” like we meant it.

(I’ve heard it said that a tribe is a group of people who know the same songs.)

Now suddenly we have become interested in what is happening in the broader association – what each of the current candidates for the UUA presidency bring to the table, and the other issues to be voted on at General Assembly this year.

When our sense of connection to the UU movement expands beyond our home congregation so

does our feeling of belonging within our denomination so that when we visit any UU congregation we feel at home.

I want to also acknowledge that many people have resistance to joining groups. There are several people who are regular participants in our community who pledge generously to our budget and serve on committees but, for a variety of reasons, have decided not to officially join our congregation. One person explained, "I'm just not much of a joiner."

Growing up there were plenty of groups that we belonged to that we never had any say about. We were born into our families, into a nation, and a neighborhood and our parents made choices for us about which school we went to and whether to belong to a particular church or synagogue. Once we grow up, we come to realize that there is power in membership that you choose for yourself.

It is also true that when questioned in polls there are thousands of people in our country who report that they are Unitarian Universalists yet are not associated with any congregation.

I suspect that some of these people might define themselves as "fiercely independent". Perhaps they feel like they would have to sacrifice too much of themselves, give up too much of their individuality, to belong to a congregation. I can understand that. Belonging to a group says something about a person's identity. So, if I don't believe 100% of what a particular group espouses I would be reticent to align myself with it.

The way I understand it, religious identity and personal growth are developed and lived out through engagement with one another in the local congregation. I suppose a person can hold UU beliefs in total isolation. But I have to think that we have a richer experience when we are in a covenantal relationship within a community and can learn and grow from our encounters with one another.

Besides, so much of our faith is about peace and justice making in the world. It is so much easier to do this work when we have a place to come together on Sundays to rest, reflect and reenergize ourselves.

Psychologists who study the theory of love and attachment tell us how much human beings need to belong with someone, to someone. We come into the world physically and emotionally dependent upon others for our very survival. As we grow up we tend to accept the delusion that to be a mature adult means we shed this dependency, we become *independent*. It is true that it is important to learn how to move through the world on our own, but it would be a mistake to think that we stop relying on other people, especially for emotional support. And yet it is seen as a sign of weakness to need help.

I have a friend in town who is raising two teenage daughters by herself. She is the sole provider for her family and has to make all those tough decisions that childrearing demands all by herself. At the end of her day she does not have someone with whom to discuss the best way to handle

discipline issues, or worry along with her about the relationship choices her 17-year-old is making. She was embarrassed to admit to me that she crawls in bed at night exhausted and depleted and sometimes feels helplessly alone.

I just keep thinking that it is not supposed to be this way. I don't think that people are equipped to raise children in isolation from the support of a community of some kind. It is just too much.

***^[SEP]We belong to each other.

In this scary economic climate, where I am seeing people all around me lose their jobs, their homes, and their financial security that they worked their whole lives to build,

In a time when men and women feel crushed beneath the burden of raising their children alone, In a time when there is war and brutality in the world,^[SEP]And we all know someone who is in pain, either in body or soul,

These are the times when, as a poet so eloquently put it, "the world is getting narrower and it is harder to squeeze through without touching"

This is my hope for our new members: that you let UUCM become the place where everybody knows your name. Because here we belong to each other. Here we practice knowing that. And in time I hope you allow your identification with Unitarian Universalism to grow so that your sense of belonging within this denomination flourishes.

"We need each other, and I need you. There isn't room not to touch anymore." Amen