

BECOMING TRUSTWORTHY PEOPLE

Many therapists would claim, and I'd agree, that the basic task of all religion is to reaffirm the first relationship of trust between mother and child: namely, the original assurance that somebody is present for and tied with me, without whom I cannot live.

We simply can never experience too much trust too early. Little ones need all the sustaining support we can receive from the moment we burst into this wonderful, frightening scene called life. Therefore, in our UU child celebrations, our purpose isn't to save babies from purgatory, let alone hell, but to give each child the best running start possible on this earth. We pay tribute to our babies' "vulnerable requests for warmth and affection, for trust and honesty." We let these little ones know that not only their parents are glad they're alive, but so is an entire Fellowship.

Our three San Diego grandchildren: Trevor, 12; Corinne 10; and Owen 5 are blessedly surrounded with so many trustworthy, loving hands, beginning with their devoted parents, Russ and Misha. Carolyn and I possess the unsurpassed joy of merely adding our hands and hearts to the nurture of these grandchildren.

Almost every Wednesday, since Trevor was born 12+ years ago, we've had one of the grandkids with us for the entire day. Now, we're closing out our time with Owen—our precious and final San Diego grandbaby—before he goes off to kindergarten this Fall.

I'll never forget the little stylized ritual that Trevor and I enjoyed when he was perhaps three or so. Late in the afternoon, we'd go outdoors, and placing him on my shoulder, we'd peek over his family's fence into the backyard of a certain neighbor, scouting about for new and old objects or whatever grabbed our attention. Then we'd

play with a rubber ball or engage in some sort of physical activity. When it grew nearly dark, we'd gaze skyward to see what might be going on in the heavens.

One time, we spotted the moon and some stars and were simply staring away, real quietly. I gave his tiny back a circling rub; then, I felt his little hand return the favor. No words were spoken, no words were needed. Loving, I was loved back. Caressed, Trevor kept the gift moving. It's what we call trust.

Kids need such connections of embodied trust from the git-go or their spirits shrivel. And, yes, we adults never grow too old for back rubs as well.

Let me relate another childhood incident of trust, an exchange I had as a ten-year-old newspaper carrier. I'm sure our son, Russ, experienced something similar and many of you other newspaper deliverers have as well. I was taught an unforgettable lesson by an older widow. As Mrs. Taylor grew increasingly blind, she came to the place where she could no longer see to make accurate change, when I came to her home to collect.

Oh, remember the joyous days when we delivered newspapers by foot and bicycles rather than by cars and when we collected at the end of the month in person, hoping for those precious 25 cent tips.

Anyway, on that unforgettable Saturday morning Mrs. Taylor drew her leather pocketbook from her purse, handed it to me and said: "Tommy, I can't see very well any more; please help yourself to whatever I owe you." As I opened the purse, with a snap on top, I was suddenly struck with far more than money. I was struck with what a wonderful thing it is to be trusted, utterly trusted!

By definition then, for me, trust is neither intellectual certitude nor impulsive faith. It's even more than confidence. Trust is derived from the German word "trost"

meaning comfort, implying an instinctive, unquestioning reliance upon something or someone. Sort of like Trevor gently rubbing my back and my rubbing his. Or Mrs. Taylor opening her purse and her heart to me. Trust happens whenever we embrace another person without pressure or strings attached. Oh, I was surely blessed, for I received (without either deserving or earning) an abundance of such trust especially from my Mom. I bet you've also tapped into the treasure-trove of trust along life's pathway.

Trust is a profound spiritual affirmation: it becomes our core way of seeing and sizing up the world as essentially benign. The trusting person claims that it's right and good to be alive, for *me* to be alive, right *here* and *now*.

When I trust my inner self, I can grow to become the person I'm meant to become. And when I trust you, I'm able to allow you to share life's journey with me. I'm able to give and receive generously. I'm able to be intimate. Trust is crucial to a stable and enduring devotional bond, be it between family members, partners, work associates or members of a congregation like our Fellowship.

Let me offer another parallel. In rock climbing, there's a step called the "commitment move." You're tied to the ropes, and there's a moment you have to let go of solid ground to move to the next higher place. It's a scary step. Why? Because you must trust what you're tied to more than what you're standing on.

Yes, my friends, in the near future you will be negotiating a bold and beautiful bond with a new minister. But your job's not finished when you have candidating week and hold your congregational vote; you've just begun the pathway of trust. Then comes the scary part. You're going to need, both pulpit and pew, to trust one another at every

turn, to make commitment moves as an overall congregation, through fair and foul weather, as you climb toward places unknown.

To advance to the next higher, bolder, wider place as a Fellowship, you'll have to remember that you're yoked in shared ministry. You're not involved in some independent quest but enmeshed in an interdependent adventure. You're tethered in sacred trust, pulpit and pew together, for all the days and nights you shoulder together the welfare of this precious venture called San Dieguito Fellowship.

You see, you must trust what you're tied to more than what you're currently standing upon. But you're tied not only to one another, as minister and parishioners; you're also tied inextricably to countless sisters and brother in our illustrious UU heritage who've gone before you and all those coming on ahead, both within this Fellowship and in our larger movement. And, yes, you'll always be tied to me, even when I'm long gone and far away.

Wow, you're tethered to a whole lot. Can you feel the tug? Are you willing to yank and be yanked purposefully and compassionately, all the way home? And are you willing to pull your weight at home, at work, in this Fellowship?

Trust means that we won't ever intentionally be harmed by another, yet trust also means that we'll be positively critiqued, gently challenged, and warmly carried when necessary. Whenever we're filled with trust, we can blurt out: "I'm surrounded and sustained by support even when I seem to be slipping or sinking." Philip Booth's poem epitomizes trust when it says: "Lie gently and wide to the light-year stars. Lie back and the sea will hold you." Booth is pointing to what Christianity has called the loving arms of Jesus or what our Universalist faith means when it encourages us to "rest assured,"

knowing that everyone everywhere resides in the trustworthy embrace of a spirit of eternal love.

It's my growing conviction that one doesn't have to practice a conventional religion to be whole, or even, have to believe in any particular conception of God to be whole. What's critical to be a whole person, indeed a holy pilgrim, is whether or not we harbor an attitude of bedrock **trust** in response to ourselves and others, indeed the entire Creation itself. At core, are you fearful or are you trusting? That, for me, constitutes the primary religious question we all must answer, daily, and in all our life-encounters.

Of course, trusting includes moments of reasonable doubt and necessary skepticism, but not cynicism, for cynicism deadens the soul. Cynicism turns our face away from the very universe trust would have us embrace. Cynics tend to hold a life-membership in the cold-water brigade. And healthy congregations need to convert their cold-water brigades into hopeful gangs!

I know it comes as no surprise to any of us, especially those who've been practicing it for decades, that Unitarian Universalism isn't a perfect religion. Hardly. We're marked by ample warts and biases, but when we remain true to our mission, we're a life-affirming rather than a life-denying people. We major in hope not despair, trust over fear, and we place love at the heart of our every choice.

Unitarian Universalists hold tenaciously to the conviction that no matter how bruised, betrayed or burned our spirit may be, you and I can become trustworthy, we can begin to experience and deliver assurance and confidence in safe, secure, steady doses...starting in this, our own chosen religious home.

Yes, as I said at the start of this sermon, the basic purpose of our religion is to reaffirm the basic, initial relationship of trust that we felt as babies or to grow trust if it was non-existent, or to restore trust whenever it was broken.

Everything good flows from basic trust.

Yet we dwell in a world where mistrust is rampant. Distrust of the primary institutions—whether partnership or government, even religion—is pervasive. Indeed, the very word illness comes from the Latin term *ensatus*. It's a picture word that means literally: "not having one's elbows aligned." So, instead of being in a relaxed position or having handles to hold things in balance, an ill person is neither relaxed nor balanced.

In like manner, less trusting or healthy groups are more rigid and imbalanced. They lack elbow room. They don't have the flexibility to bend, move and grow. When you trust, you're open to flow and expansion, you're elastic and ever-evolving. Without trust, both as individuals and as institutions, we grow inflexible, we're trapped without elbow room.

One of the books on the mandatory reading list during the tail-end of my seminary training was the autobiography of Malcolm X as assisted by Alex Haley, author of *Roots*. This splendid memoir retells the absorbing story of an African-American man who rose from being a hoodlum, thief, dope-peddler and pimp to become indispensable leader of the Black Revolution. If anyone ever made a remarkable comeback from mistrust and distrust, it was Malcolm X.

Malcolm X had to grow trust from scratch as an adult, even between himself and members of his own race. This is evidenced in the years of collaboration between

Malcolm X and Alex Haley in the writing of his autobiography. Their relationship slowly ripens in trust until, as Haley reports in the epilogue:

When Malcolm made long trips, such as to San Francisco and Los Angeles, I didn't go along, but frequently, usually very late at night, he would telephone me, and ask how the book was coming along.

One call that I'll never forget came at close to 4 a.m., waking me; he must have just gotten up in LA. His voice said: "Alex Haley? I said sleepily, "Yes? Oh hey, Malcolm!" His voice softly said, "Haley, I trust you seventy per cent!" and then he hung up.

I lay a short time thinking about Malcolm, then I went back to sleep feeling warmed by that call, as I am still warmed to remember it. Neither of us ever mentioned it.

You see, trust is irrelevant, if we blithely claim the final answers to living and dying, or if we avoid deep friendship or loving while on earth, or if you want this Fellowship to drive with the brakes on. But at least 70% trust is essential for those of us who, like Alex Haley and Malcolm X, choose the route of freedom-within-faithfulness in our bonds of intimacy. And, surely, if you want to be known as genuine trustees of this Fellowship, you must, every last one of you, abound in trust, at least 70% of the time. I personally prefer a number closer to 90%.

People, who are trusters, give ourselves over to friends or partners or religious shareholders without giving ourselves away. What a tough, tricky lesson trust requires: in trusting, we learn how to negotiate surrender yet bypass subjugation.

Yes, inherent in trust is a willingness to leap beyond the familiar and comfortable into foreign territories of bold surrender.

To trust someone won't require certainty. While adequate evidence must be present, there's never final proof. We can't conclusively prove our trustworthiness to

anyone, even our best friends or our loved ones. If we could, we'd be referring to something other than trust.

Trust, the real article, is the union of some data, some gamble, some buoyancy, some grace, some risk, and ample release. In matters of friendship, family and faith, where trust is sorely tested, the power of our love is in direct proportion to the fountain of our trust.

I know you're nervous about your future as a Fellowship. You should be. Just know that while nervousness is creative, panic is destructive. And remember, that in the throes of anxiety, strong, sturdy religious pilgrims always dare to be courageous. They saunter bravely into the unknown because they're soaked in trust.

And never forget: you're not alone. You belong to a grand and glorious heritage of fellow-travelers reaching all the way back to our 16th century roots in Transylvania. And, moreover, you're tethered to all of us in the San Diego cluster who'll be mightily cheering you on.

So, here's my message: life is finally about pledging our trust while wandering this earth. For a sense of unshakable trust in the Creation *and* in one another surely makes love achievable and death endurable.

Tom Owen-Towle
June 8, 2008