

GROWING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY!

I wrote a book recently on what I consider the 12 hallmarks of healthy congregations. Now, there's been a lot written on theology, from every conceivable angle, but precious little on ecclesiology, especially the art of being and doing church the liberal religious way, our Unitarian Universalist Fellowship way.

I will be conducting a Saturday morning workshop, November 17th, here at our Fellowship, on this very topic. I hope you will plan to participate.

As San Dieguitans you pride yourselves on being individual questers: pursuing the good, the true, and the beautiful in your own fashion. And so you should, and so do I. But, I dare say, there's more to this strange, wondrous business of progressive religion. Being a solitary traveler is but a 100% half-truth. For Unitarian Universalism, at its finest and fullest, demands far more of its adherents than rugged independence. It requires that we become builders and sustainers of the interdependent web wherever we're planted.

But, if the cosmic web seems too awesome to imagine, then reflect a moment upon the modest spiderweb. The Hebrew word for **hope** has the root meaning of "to twist" or "to twine" and is related to the word *kivin* for a spiderweb. So much of our hoping and loving has this spiderweb quality to it, doesn't it, this quality of incredible beauty braided from the tiny, flawed, even petty strands of our communal living.

But, of course, lest I wax romantic, spiders, so it seems, weave irregular webs that can entrap other creatures. And this Fellowship, like a spiderweb, represents a faulty, sometimes devious, enterprise as well, plus our individual contributions aren't always admirable. But

ultimately, our San Dieguito community is the web of all our gifts: the zany, the foolish, the wondrous ones included.

Psychologist author Scott Peck claims that “in and through community lies the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important.” I believe that, I bet my life on that conviction. However, Peck makes critical distinctions between pseudo-community, a smug collective, where members feel settled and cozy *and* genuine community, a growing connection that requires enormous energy and time, commitment and daring.

I’ve often thought when folks come to worship on Sunday, we should hand out orders of service with a smile, to be sure, but also dispense hard-hats and life-preservers, because our liberal religion isn’t risk-free, but a dangerous zone, where we’re going to be challenged to halt bad habits and make healthy choices. Come as you are, yes, but, around this Fellowship, we are encouraged to grow toward whom we might become!

If you remember nothing else I say this year, I want you to remember that growing the Beloved Community right where you’re planted, is your primary purpose for being a Fellowship. The Beloved Community includes you, yes, but it always transcends you and your individual interests...just like our sacred container for our gifts of water this morning is all-embracing.

I first caught a glimpse of the Beloved Community, its power and pertinence, when I went by bus to Selma, Alabama back in 1965 as a San Francisco Theological School greenhorn. I’d never been in the South before. Our sole job as students, every day, was to clear the fields of cow dung, followed by setting up huge tents for the civil rights marchers led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You may recall that rabbis, priests, and ministers, from across the land, were among the front-line protesters who responded to King’s summons to “put our bodies where the trouble was.”

Our seminary president, Ted Gill contended that urging students and faculty to go to Selma, Alabama, alongside himself, was the high point of his career, even though, he confessed, it cost the seminary some \$5 million dollars in lost revenue from disgruntled supporters. And my own mother, years later, would second Gill's sentiments: "Tom, as far as I'm concerned, you can store all your awards away in the closet; even stock the basement of libraries with your fine books, because your major achievement as a religious person was when you placed your untested and frightened body on the line in Selma."

Indeed, what a transformative week! In the evenings we enjoyed the stunning protest-entertainment of Dick Gregory, Peter, Paul and Mary, and other such activist luminaries. Why today you'd pay hundreds a night for such concerts.

And I'll never forget Andy Young, then one of King's moral lieutenants, shouting forth, "Hey folks, you know why we're here? We're here to love the hell out of Alabama!" A bold, brazen universalist decree, if there ever was one. In the same vein, we'd nightly huddle and belt out the traditional civil rights song:

I know one thing we did right, was the day we started to fight, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on...

There we were: fellow Americans of multiple colors and religions and classes, doing our modest share to bring about an end to legal segregation in our homeland. Some Americans like Andrew Goodman and Jimmie Lee Jackson, as well as Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb (who were both Unitarians), were murdered in this moral struggle. But at the end of this period, legal equality had been won for persons of color. It's critical to remember that all the social movements of the 1960s and later (the anti-war movement, the women's movement, and the sexual orientation movement) followed in the wake of this civil rights effort.

And the words of that protest song still ring relevant in human struggles for full dignity, at home and abroad. For whatever battle is being waged throughout the universe—internally,

interpersonally, or internationally—we'd do well to keep these brave words in mind: "I know one thing we did right, was the day we started to fight"—fight not for injury but for impact—to battle for what's fair and compassionate, to scrap for right relationships at home and work, during play and throughout society.

We often forget that the nonviolence of Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't passive and weak-kneed but tough-minded and strong-hearted. It resisted wrongdoing and challenged slothfulness.

The civil rights campaigners whom I met in Selma, Alabama 42 years ago were willing to risk their jobs, their homes, and even their lives to create an extraordinary movement—that, despite setbacks and detours, has never abandoned the pursuit of the Beloved Community: a social-spiritual reality that includes yet always transcends our own skins, classes, orientations, and beliefs.

In truth, the Beloved Community is rarely embodied by one place, one time, or one group but ever widens its embrace to include outsiders, strangers, the marginalized. One more step, one more embrace. The Beloved Community is always bigger than the imaginable, lies always beyond the achievable.

I've chosen the concept of the Beloved Community because it reminds us liberal religionists that individual fulfillment, important to be sure, can never be our paramount goal. We're fundamentally *embedduals*, to use Robert Kegan's word—that is, individuals embedded in circles of meaning and power.

Or as King himself put it: "The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the Beloved Community."

And so, let me say it again, with unmistakable clarity: Unitarian Universalism, at its most authentic and inclusive, is never finally about self-fulfillment but always about communal salvation, the creation of the Beloved Community. Our way of religion is required to furnish a large, spacious household not merely a snug, comfortable collective: to be stewards of a holy place that dares to open wide its heart, its benefits, and its enlightenment to everyone.

The Beloved Community heralds a reality that surpasses any particular congregation, surely any given society or land, extending to the edges of the cosmos, therewith welcoming all of God's creatures into its compassionate embrace. In the Beloved Community, nothing is overlooked and no one is ignored: especially the last, the least, and the lost.

To be sure, there exist other comparable names for the Beloved Community. Throughout religious history, it's been called the New Jerusalem or the Realm of God or the Peaceable Home. In Buddhist circles, they say "may you go as a Sangha," that is, may you travel not simply as a lone pilgrim, but go as a Beloved Community. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, has gone so far as to suggest: "It's possible that the next Buddha will not take on any individual form, but assume the form of a Sangha, a community practicing understanding and loving kindness."

I ask you: is there a bigger phrase than the "Beloved Community" to embrace the global, ecological, congregational, and familial challenges of existence? Can you imagine a more germane imperative to heed than that offered by King—given the expansive mission required of liberal religion today amidst pervasive greed and international travail?

It's my conviction that growing the Beloved Community constitutes the preeminent goal of liberal religious life. It's our reason for existing as a social-spiritual entity, since it speaks to our private hearts while confronting the public world. Beloved Community pulls and pushes us in everything we resemble and risk as a religious adventure.

The crowd once asked the Rabbi Jesus, “When are we going to get this and when are we going to get that?” And he replied, “Seek first the realm of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.” In other words, first things first. Seek first the caress, the challenge, and the critique of the Beloved Community and the rest will likely follow.

Okay, I’m peddling pretty heady philosophical stuff this morning, so lest anyone gets lost in the ether, here’s a look at the sticky matter of political and patriotic diversity in our liberal religious congregations, a real example from my own parish history. You’d have your own examples. But mine this morning will have increasing relevance as the war in Iraq continues and we face fierce, likely contentious, home elections up ahead.

Truly one of our proudest moments at First Church in San Diego, where Carolyn and I served as a team ministry for 24 years, occurred during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, when we simultaneously provided deployment blues support groups for families of those serving in the Gulf as well as protest rallies for those in opposition to the war. Most people knew where I stood, for I’d been a founding member of our local Peace Resource Center back in 1975. Yet they also knew that we were dedicated to sustaining political democracy and patriotic diversity in our congregation.

So, while I was preaching a sermon on the Gulf War, voicing opposition to our government’s military engagement, one of our parish members, dressed in complete military regalia, stood during the entire worship service, some twenty feet away from the pulpit, in full view of the congregation, signaling his clear commitment to waging what for him was a “just” war.

Phillip approached me immediately afterwards, and, in tearful embrace, declared: “Your sermon, our entire church approach, hasn’t driven either me or my family out. As a military man, I can still worship here. Hallelujah to our conscious acceptance of honorable differences.” We

then walked arm-in-arm from the sanctuary to our meeting hall, to share in a congregation-wide airing of divergent patriotic concerns. And I thought of country-western singer, Ashley Judd's song: "Love can build a bridge between your heart and mine...Love can build a bridge, don't you think it's time, don't you think it's time..."

Oh, I could regale you with the times my congregations have also done insensitive things, flailed and fumbled in pursuit of righteousness, but on that morning, in a small way, we resembled some belovedness.

And so, I say, if the purpose of life is to create both small and big communities of belovedness, then I invite you, this morning, to consider deeper involvement here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito. We need your gifts, and you likely could use ours. If you've been lurking around the edges, I challenge you to come on board, to join up and join in this flawed yet sacred enterprise which does its fair share to create pieces of belovedness where it's planted.

The American poet, Carl Sandberg, became a committed member of the Unitarian Church in Asheville, North Carolina. This is why. He said:

You can't go tramping around from parish to parish and build anything up. Who would want to go on a picnic all the time and eat out of other people's baskets? You've got to feel the importance of your own individual participation in its life.

Every Wednesday, for the past 11 years, on our day off, we've had the privilege of taking care of one of our three San Diego grandchildren, Trevor, Corinne, and now Owen, for the final year before he leaves us for full-time school. Together we've engaged in various rituals that appeal to one or the other of us. One of our routines has become singing and or dancing folk and campfire melodies. A favorite is the *Hokey-Pokey*.

You know the drill: “You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about.” The kids really hurl their bodies into this ditty.

The hokey-pokey starts with our right foot, goes through most of our limbs, then ends up with “you put your whole self in, you put your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s a l l a b o u t . ”

Yes, yes, yes. That’s what this Fellowship life *is* all about, must be about. We start by sticking our toes into the stream, and hopefully, if it’s a sufficiently good fit (don’t hold out for a perfect fit, for one doesn’t exist), we get wetter and wetter until we end up plunging into the flowing river of this responsibly free religion. Such, serious whole-bodied participation is truly what it's all about: in family, in religion, in life itself.

Who of us really wants to come to the end of our journey realizing that we’ve been spectators on the sidelines, toe-testers, yes-butters, partially committed to those communities that are safe and saving for us and all whom we touch? Who of us wants to go to our graves knowing that we could have been a card-carrying member of a Beloved Community but were too wishy-washy to say “I do, I can, I will.”

For all I really want, and I bet you do too, when it comes our turn to re-enter the ground, is to be numbered among those who chose to throw their lot with a temple, sangha, mosque, or fellowship that moves ever onward, toward the Beloved Community. And yes, I agree with Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. that none of us adults will likely reach the Promised Land ourselves, but who knows, maybe our children’s children will move closer than we did to realizing the Beloved Community.

That's our fervent prayer. That's our sacred work. That's our joyful privilege. That's why we exist as a liberal religious presence in North County not merely for our own personal growth but for the creation of the Beloved Community right here where we're planted.

Shalom, salaam, namaste, blessed be, and amen.

Tom Owen-Towle
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