

BREATHING TOGETHER

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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Once upon a time there was an abbot of a monastery who was very good friends with the rabbi of a local synagogue. It was Europe, and times were hard The abbot found his community dwindling and the faith life of his monks shallow and lifeless. Life in the monastery was dying. He went to his friend and wept.

Sometimes we know it best when we come upon its absence or its failure. Each summer when heat waves strike, each winter when overwhelming storms blow through, during hurricane season, we hear of individuals dying of weather-related causes. And while the heat or the cold or the hurricane is the killer, the stage is set for fatalities by the absence of community: many of those who die live alone, with no one, no family or friends, to check in on them or notice their distress. With sad regularity, the media provide us of reports of a breakdown in community where someone was the victim of a crime and nobody stopped or stepped in to help, despite hearing their cries, either unwilling to become involved or assuming that someone else would respond.

We seem to have entered a period in our national life when polarization, coming apart and rejecting, rather than coming together and embracing, is the norm, when the value of important foundations of societal community, communal programs such as Social Security or Medicare or pension funds, is questioned, weighed against the potentially greater value of programs that would keep us focused on our own individual needs, attending to our individual well-being, making plans for our individual futures. Every person for himself, for herself, becomes the rule of the day.

All the while that economic and technological changes draw us ever closer in some form of global community, making us increasingly interdependent in a myriad of ways, and while we embark on military endeavors that are ostensibly driven by a desire to break down barriers between countries, to end antagonisms and make societies open to each other, we continue to practice forms of exploitation and doing business that deny any possibility of community by transforming the other into something less than human.

Congregations have always been the place where individuals could gather and enjoy a sense of community, ever since the time of the first churches. But like every other form of community, even the church community can fray, fall apart, be revealed as having gaps. If ours is a typical congregation here, when we launch our annual stewardship drive next week, we will have the distressing experience of contacting some member to discuss financial commitments, only to hear a justifiable outrage from the member that “you only call me when you want money.” Our care for one another here, our attentiveness to those in our community, falls short.

And when it falls short, when we unhappily come upon the breakdown of community, in the congregation, in the neighborhood, in the culture, in the world, we cast about for some way to restore it. For we know, even without the disturbing media stories to remind us, that outside of community we falter, even die, that our lives mean little if we have not life together.

[The abbot] went to his friend and wept. His friend, the rabbi, comforted him and told him: “There is something you need to know, my brother. We have long known in the Jewish community that the Messiah is one of you.”

“What,” exclaimed the abbot, “the Messiah is one of us? How can that be?”

But the rabbi insisted that it was so, and the abbot went back to his monastery wondering and praying, comforted and excited.

Once back in the monastery, walking down the halls and in the courtyard, he would pass by a monk and wonder if he was the one, the Messiah. Sitting in chapel, praying, he

would hear a voice and look intently at a face and wonder if he was the one, and he began to treat all of his brothers with respect, with kindness and awe, with reverence. Soon it became quite noticeable.

Ask almost any person anywhere why he or she participates in a church of almost any sort, and one of the first responses you will receive is that the church provides a “sense of community.” More important than a ticket to heaven or the reassurance of having a correct worldview or an improved social standing or a direct line to God or any of the other more predictable reasons people go to church is the experience of community that they expect, and often find, in a congregation.

But continue the conversation and ask the person who enjoys a sense of community at his or her church to then define what that sense of community means, or to describe what it looks or feels like, and the response may go in drastically different directions. For some, a sense of community is a variety of social togetherness that may differ from other experiences of social togetherness by a quality of friendliness. Or a sense of community may come from being in the presence of others who are “my kind of people,” who “think like me.” This response is especially popular among Unitarian Universalists, no doubt because we are so accustomed to finding ourselves the odd ducks, the ones who are not like others, who think in very different ways than those around us. Or the answer may shift from a focus on the quality of community life, from describing traits of the group, to how the individual experiences himself or herself within a community. In this case, a sense of community may be characterized as stemming from the experience of being accepted and welcomed into the group. “I can just be myself, I can say what I think without being criticized”: a community embraces the individuals who come to it without judgment.

And while all these definitions are useful, none of them accurately gets at the real meaning of community. In fact, they actually point to the ways in which a sense of community can be lost, compromised and slowly changed into something quite different than real community. Friendliness, like-mindedness, acceptance of the individual without requiring him or her to be somebody different: however pleasurable those experiences may be, they are not hallmarks of a community and to the extent that we focus on generating those experiences for ourselves, we risk losing the community we have.

Perhaps the best example of what constitutes a community for me came from a member of my previous UU congregation, an elderly member who was not able to attend worship services easily because of the many challenges in getting up and getting out that aging created for her. One day I was talking with her about Sunday plans, when I had a commitment to preach at another church. Because the member had made clear how much she enjoyed my sermons, and because I am always eager to think of Sunday mornings as being all about me, I glibly commented that she would probably spend that particular Sunday relaxing at home with the *New York Times*. But she brought me up short when she replied, “Oh no, I’ll be going to the worship service this Sunday. I always try especially hard to attend on Sundays when I think there may not be many people there because the subject or the guest speaker doesn’t sound very interesting. I go to make sure that somebody is present, and to be there for the few others who may come.”

A remarkable comment, is it not, in a time when we tend to talk about what we expect to get from going to a worship service, when we look for what might be in it for us. This aging member attended in order to be sure that somebody was there, and to be there for

others. Sure, she likely did get something for herself—but her main focus was on attending for the sake of all the rest of the congregation.

And this exchange has become for me a distillation of what community is truly about, and it is *not* about what I get, but about what I bring, about what I give, about my commitment to the others in the community, about my willingness to be here for others as much as, if not more than, for myself. Inhabiting the same space for an hour on Sunday mornings is not the same as belonging to a community where your presence truly matters to others and their presence truly matters to you.

One of the other monks came to the abbot and asked him what had happened to him. After some coaxing, the abbot told him what the rabbi had said. Soon the other monk was looking at his brothers differently and wondering. The word spread through the monastery quickly: the Messiah is one of us. Soon the whole monastery was full of life, worship, kindness, and grace. The prayer life was rich and passionate, devoted, and the psalms and liturgy and services were alive and vibrant. Soon the surrounding villagers were coming to the services and listening and watching intently, and there were many who wished to join the community.

John Courtenay Murray, a Catholic theologian, once described the earliest churches as a form of “conspiracy” because the members had learned to conspire, *con spire*, with breath, to breathe together. Though regarded by outsiders as a sinister behavior, those in the church understood themselves to be practicing a common way of life, grounded in common values, which would be meaningful for those within the church and had the potential to be meaningful for the rest of the world as well. By joining together in community, they were enabled to be better people than they could have been if left on their own, to their own devices.

Unitarian Universalists have frequently seen themselves similarly regarded as suspicious characters, possibly cult members, because they appear to hold values that are at odds with the rest of the culture—which, of course, is always what churches have been

expected to do, to maintain a value system that challenges, not endorses, the usual ways of the world. Our BUC members have since the beginning been conspiring, breathing together, joining themselves in an intentional spiritual community that supports them and their children as they grow into better people than they would have become without the presence and participation in this community.

People who have learned to breathe together can afford to think differently, and the diversity of ideas and lifestyles in a true community becomes not a threat but an enrichment. I may initially enjoy coming here because of the presence of like-minded people, but it is the people who are of quite a different mind than me who will be the greatest facilitators of my spiritual growth. One study of religious community characterized it as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” The ongoing challenge of learning how to be with that person I least want to live with, how to forge some sort of relationship with him, how to listen compassionately to her sharing of joys and sorrows, how to stand beside him as we sing hymns and exchange greetings, how to gather around the same table with her in coffee hour and engage in conversation, how to fit someone like him into my own understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist: that ongoing challenge will carry me further along my spiritual path than any other practice or meditation technique or insightful book ever can.

As newcomers entered the monastery, after taking their vows, they were told the mystery, the truth that their life was based upon, the source of their strength and life together: the Messiah is one of us. The monastery grew and expanded into house after house, and all of the monks grew in wisdom and grace before others and in the eyes of God. And they say still, if you stumble across this place, where there is life and hope and kindness and graciousness, that the secret is the same: the Messiah is one of us. (Megan McKenna, *Mary*)

This has been a difficult week for many of you here, as you learned the disconcerting news of anticipated changes in our church music staff. In talking about these changes

with you, I heard frequent references to what you called a “Unitarian miracle,” by which you meant the experience of inspired, creative leadership. Your music staff, you believed, had made possible something miraculous here.

It is indeed true that gifted professional leadership is a blessing, and such leadership does make wonderful programming possible. But professional leaders are not miracles, and the work we do, as ministers, as music staff, as religious education directors, is not miraculous. To see us as miracle workers may be wonderful for our egos, and we may sometimes want to be seen that way, but it is false, utterly false. No minister, no religious education director, no music or choir director, ever, ever, created a miracle.

The miracle here, in the music program, in the religious education program, in the congregation, the true miracle here, is you—this community of people, with all your gifts and flaws, who commit yourselves to giving of precious time and resources, to come together day after week after month after year, singing, playing, worshipping, learning to give and receive and live principled lives that make the world a better place. You bring the miracle because the Messiah is, truly, one of you. To see the miracle, the Messiah, as coming from outside the community does the community a sad disservice.

A community breathes together. A community includes people who would not ordinarily live together. Individuals in a community care more about what they give than what they get. Individuals in a community know their presence matters to others, and that the presence of the others matters to them.

“Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Jesus left his followers with such a promise, suggesting that we are predisposed for community, and that when we are able to open up that predisposition and actually

come together in a community, something mysterious and sacred happens among us. We describe this phenomenon as living in the context of an interconnected web of existence—again, recognizing that being part of a community is built into us, built into our reality, and that to enjoy that community we only need let go of some of the illusion of our separateness and see the community all about us.

And we are enabled to do this inasmuch as we know in our heart of hearts the truth of all spiritual traditions, the truth of this story, the truth preached by founding Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing: each of us harbors within a Messiah, a Divine Seed, an everlasting love that is the spirit of this place, of each one of us here, of all life everywhere. May we welcome one another as the Messiah, in love, in community.