

**The Spiritual Discipline of Community:
A Life-Affirming Connection**

Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller

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Sermon

A spiritual discipline does not guarantee a spiritual experience, but it does help make us ready for one to occur, and it helps give us a way of addressing the Holy. Coming to church does not guarantee a religious experience, but it helps make us ready and leads us in constructive ways in response. For Unitarian Universalists, the creation of community is our spiritual discipline.

Each of us brings a separate truth here. We bring the truth of our own lives, our own stories. We don't come as empty vessels, but rather we come as full people, seeking to add to our truth and to add to our stories. This room is rich with truth, rich with experiences. We come here needy, joyful, frightened, anxious, bored, strong, creative, and ever so human. We all bring our truth with us. Let us recognize the truth and the stories in everyone's life. May we hear and honor the truth we bring, as we gather together again, and again this morning. Together we have truths. Together we have a story. Together we have community. Today we celebrate the power of our connection, the power of our community. Yes, we come with stories, and together we create stories.

I once had a Christian minister describe Unitarian Universalists in contrast to her more conventionally Christian faith and congregation in this way: She said, "To find the Holy, we take communion, and in that communion, we realize the presence of Holy Love. But you, UUs, do not take communion in the conventional sense, but time after time, as you gather you create the body of love by creating actual community, in coffee hours, in church socials, and in your justice work which is so essential to you. Your communion is less obvious but every bit

as profound as ours.” I have lived into the truth of this observation for years—ever since seminary, and I find it truer with each passing year. Our communion, our creation of the holy, is not other worldly but very this worldly, about the here and now, about our relationships with one another. We are made more whole by our connections with one another. And what a joy that can be, and what amazing people we have within our community.

Almost every week, I hear another story. Some one will come to me and say, “You wouldn’t believe what I just heard. Did you know that so and so, was in the paper again. Did you know that this new member helped found this organization? Did you know that...so and so...wrote a new book. Did I know that? Almost always I am surprised and delighted and at the same time not surprised. The creativity and capacity of this community and our community is amazing and delightful. There is just about nothing that I would be surprised to hear; one of you could have been responsible for almost anything. And we are just people, like so many other people, like so many other congregations. This is the joy of life. To discover the stories that give meaning and are the rich texture of who we are and what we have done, and what we are doing now. This is a story of our community.

The nature of true community, of a strong and vital religious community, is the story of welcoming and of radical hospitality. I have always liked the Jewish Passover ritual. The part I find most meaningful is the chair left empty for the great prophet Elijah. This chair is left open because we never know when the prophet will return. We never know in what form or in which new person the wise and holy presence will appear. So, room is left, just in case it is in our humble house, on this special occasion, that the prophet will again appear. For us a religious

liberals, this is not literal, but a metaphor for the gift of new acquaintance. It is a reminder that any one of us is capable of offering truth and divine insight.

For us, as religious liberals, God is not somewhere else, but that which we might call “Holy” is everywhere and present in every person.

Martin Buber puts it this way. Religion, he says, is not a noetic act, not an intellectual exercise, not a thinking subject which comes into encounter with the passive object world. Instead, religion is a reciprocal meeting, in the fullness of life, between active existences encountering one another. In this encounter the sacred becomes more fully present.

Life can be so wonder-filled, though we often forget to see it. Near-death experiences, or the death of a loved one, quickly bring us to a place where we can again see the extraordinary beauty of the moment, of each and every thing around us. Meditation can do the same thing, but not always. The Buddhists say the point of religion is to be present in the here and now. Unitarian Universalists say that any encounter with a sense of the holy will be in the present moment.

On the pulpit this morning and on the order of service cover (and on the last page of the printed version of this sermon) is an image of divine meeting, a visual depiction of what Martin Buber calls an “I-Thou” relationship. When two people meet, there can be a connection that is profound. When it moves from mere meeting, to a meeting in which Life becomes fully present, something more takes place and a spark or spirit of synergy is present. In those moments, the encounter is not of an object, but of a profound and subtle otherness that is not object, but vital and alive, and a reciprocal encounter. Buber calls this the “Mystical In-between.”

I experience a sense of divine encounter most fully in one-on-one-conversation, in dialogue.

Our participation in MORE², the Metropolitan Organization for Racial and Economic Equity, has created the expectation that lots of our members will schedule “one-on-one” conversations. Their perspective is that these conversations will help build vitality within each congregation. The stronger each congregation is, the stronger the network of congregations will be. That strength can and will be created in part by encouraging more one-on-one contacts and therefore more community within each congregation. The core professional and lay leadership of this organization model this expectation.

A couple of month ago, one of the Gamaliel Foundation professional organizers was about to begin doing support work with me and with MORE² around our Faith in Democracy work. Gamaliel is the parent organization for MORE². She called and asked to visit with me, to do a one-on-one. This is the expectation of this organization; people do lots of one-on-ones. “Sure,” I said. We scheduled the time. We met in what I figured would be a routine visit of a half an hour or forty-five minutes. An hour and a half later, with my head spinning and my heart and life on fire, I was “blown-away,” I was fully alive, I was clearer about my work than I had felt in years. It was one of those once-in year-or-two level of conversations. She kept asking questions and staying present. She was caring and genuinely interested. We talked about leadership. We talked about our lives. We talked about the state of our world. We talked about our shared work of trying to truly encourage democracy from a faith perspective. I find it hard to describe what happened. It was a little like therapy; it was therapeutic, but it was not psychotherapy. It was a little like falling in love;

but it was not romantic, but it was loving. What a gift to have someone simply be fully present for us and with us.

This is how one-on-ones can work. This is how religious community can be created. It involves both the art of listening and the art of loving. It is the spiritual discipline of community; it can be us at our best. It is a gift of grace, and made possible by training and intention. We have had about two hundred members involved in one-on-one conversations of this type in our church. We hope to add to that number through the efforts of our MORE² Core Team and our Membership Committee.

Almost all of us can hear, but that does not mean we know how to listen. All of us can feel love, but the art of love, like the art of listening, takes practice and intention. It is not as automatic as we might think. Just because we can hear, it does not mean that we are any good at listening. This is an acquired skill. Listening is not just hearing. Listening is not problem solving. Listening is not giving advice. Listening is not someone trying to tell us how we feel, or that our feelings are not rational. Listening is a person responding in such a way that the person sharing feels heard. Listening is the subtle and real acknowledgement of what is being shared, even when the words only partially express it. Listening is an undervalued and an essential skill for the building of relationships and for the affirmation of Life.

This process of affirmation and mutual discovery has religious implications and enriches all of our lives when we allow ourselves to practice it. It is an essential building block for the creation of community. As we say “Yes” to one another, we say “Yes” to Life.

This process is the basis for our Small Group ministries and other positive affiliation groups, like UU neighbors, the Aging Bulls, the Demeters, and some church committees that

really love their work, or for some of us who attend Sunday services Sunday after Sunday, or our lunch group or our young parents and toddlers play group. We have the gift of seeing each other's lives evolve and change, of being witnesses to the ebbs and flows of Life itself, reflected in the moments we share together. It is like watching the river of Life and Time flowing through and before us. This truly is a way to worship and to love.

Loving is so natural, we all assume that it just happens. This may be true of falling in love, but staying in love or practicing love takes more openness and more intention.

There are so many examples and many stories I might tell. I hope and believe you might be able to tell as many as I could. I think of the time that Scott England was married here to Kelly Marzett. I looked out and an entire portion of the sanctuary was filled with members of his Small Group Ministry. Seats had been reserved for the group right behind his family. They had become spiritual family to him, having been through so much as a group together -- witnessing births and death, loves and marriages and changes of jobs and just plain old life together.

I think of Charles Bebb being supported by our church members in the last months of his life. People picked him up and brought him to church. I think of the time that Charles, quite a dancer, offered a Tango class. A few had signed up for the class, but one evening no one came. That same evening our student intern, Melissa Mummert, had offered a class no one showed up for its first meeting. Often our classes are full, but not this night. So, Melissa said to Charles, "Teach me to dance. Be my dance mentor. I will dance with you, if you will teach me." They spent the evening dancing here in our sanctuary. For weeks after, they both were simply happier people. What a

simple thing the gift of our presence can be. And who knows when and how the holy will appear.

Religious encounter is a spiritual practice. It is not exotic or esoteric. It is not other worldly. It is as simple as practicing connection, welcoming and being open to one another. Spiritual discipline does not guarantee an encounter with the holy, but it makes room and trains us to be more attentive when times in our lives become profoundly meaningful. We are less likely to miss them and more likely to allow them to be a kind of everyday worship, and everyday spirituality.

The Unitarian minister and internationally acclaimed essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in *Nature* about this kind of divine encounter, except he focused his discourse upon nature. He wrote that there are times when he would hike out in to the woods and find a wonderful meadow. At times, it would be like the entire meadow was fully alive and radiant, so much so, as to nearly overwhelm him. Then a few days or a week later he would return to the same meadow and find it only a place and with no great sense of increased joy, meaning or presence. For that presence, we say “Yes.” And the rest of the time, we practice and make ourselves ready.

This is the same place that Martin Buber calls the “In Between” or a fully “I – Thou” moment. The point is not to make of the entire world an object or a means, or for us to see our encounters as a means, but to hold the possibility that any moment and every moment when we become again more fully aware is a true gift and a true act of worship.

In human relationships this is always a risk, but I say a risk worth taking. It is an encounter with the Holy that is not wholly other. It is knowing that we are alive and grateful for the gift that is ALL OF LIFE.

Readings

“Limits,” by Martin Buber

Human life and humanity come into being in genuine meetings.

There people learn not merely that they are limited by humanity, cast upon their own finitude, partialness, need of completion, but their own relationship to truth is heightened by others’ different relation to the same truth—different in accordance with their individuation, destined to take seed and grow differently.

People need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings. But beyond this they need, and it is granted to them, to see that the truth, which the soul gains by its struggle, is flashing up for the others, their fellow human beings, in a different way, and equally confirmed.

“Just a Human Being”

He was a tall, very attractive man with a pronounced forehead and a shock of very dark hair. I had met him many years ago. He was blind. From the first, we seemed to be old friends; but I had not gotten acquainted with him in any detailed sense until very recently. When I visited his community, I arranged my schedule so that we could spend several hours together. We talked of many things—books, travel, baseball, and Fellowship Church. And then we talked about blindness, the kind of life a blind man lives and particularly how he regards the fact and experience of his blindness.

“Since I saw you last,” he said, “I have been doing some public speaking, particularly before Service Clubs. It is very

difficult for even well-meaning people to regard me as just a human being. Out of sympathy or something, they make it hard for me to keep myself from feeling sorry for myself. If I do that, I am sunk. A certain sense of humor sometimes saves me. I remember one day being introduced to speak before a club. The chairman urged his group to give me a very courteous hearing because, after all, they were blessed with their eyesight—they were not like me—the least they could do for me was to give me a respectful hearing. It was pretty rugged by the time he was through. When I stood up I took out my handkerchief and simulated tears, saying, ‘Please listen to me, please, because I am a poor, helpless, blind man.’ Perhaps I should not have done that, but it was in a good clean spirit and to my amazement my take-off was interrupted by a tremendous round of applause from all those present. The point was made.

“One thing I have learned in my blindness. My contact with people is direct and immediate. How people look, what they have on, what their gestures convey, not any of the things by which we bolster our self-respect or convey our meanings makes any difference to me. I cannot see—I can only hear. All of your meaning, all of your integrity or looks—it must be put into words. And the words come without clothing. Sometimes it is dreadful—the exposure that is revealed when people cannot hide behind their customary defenses. Had you thought of it?”

When the time came for me to leave, he walked over to his desk, fumbled through some papers, and came back to my chair. He turned to his wife and asked, “Is this what I think it is, a ten-dollar bill?” “Yes,” she replied. Turning to me he said, “I want to give you this for our church. I wish I could do more.” He then repeated in measured tones, as to himself—The—Church—for—the—Fellowship—of—*All*—Peoples.”

I left his home saying over and over, “God help us to grow up to that meaning and that faith.”

“We Create a Web of Life”

We create a web of life.

This is finally the time to let go of that crazy notion that we can live separate and aloof from one another.

We create a web of life.

This is the time at last that we can come home to each other, to our mutual belonging.

We create a web of life.

And we create a web of life out of which every single one of us can use everything our stories have given us.

We create a web of life.

Every part of our lives . . . even the cruelty, even the abuse, even the addictions, even the loneliness, even the failures . . .

We create a web of life.

A web of life is created within which you can rest in that knowing. Because out of that you can act. Out of that, all power is yours. Out of that, you travel light. Out of that, you can step forward.

We create a web of life.

Let every encounter be a homecoming as we step forward now for the healing of our world. The world is not going to be saved by good people or noble people. The world is going to be healed by ordinary people, like you and me, who are not afraid of pain and who are not afraid of loving each other. Amen.