

# Our Beloved Community – Our Future – October 23, 2016

by **Minnie Venable**

I have a mashup this morning of interesting bits of AUUF history, but mostly, I'll be talking about what I want us to be in the future—which is pretty much what we are now—but we can always do better.

You probably remember that our congregation was born and granted a charter in 1950. We were part of what became known as the Fellowship Movement in Unitarianism. Fellowships, as compared to churches, could be started with as few as ten people and needed no salaried leader and no church building. Most Fellowship founders were humanists who came to Unitarianism in rebellion against the fundamentalism in mainstream churches. We were one of Texas' original thirteen Fellowships, and one of eleven still surviving. Here in the Bible Belt, however, Fellowship congregations were such strong humanists that we were described as having "a kind of fundamentalism in reverse . . . just as intolerant as the fundamentalism against which [we] . . . rebelled." And for many years, only other humanists came back, after their first visit here, and joined our congregation. One other interesting thing about the Fellowship movement though—paganism caught the interests of early Feminist humanists—while we were reclaiming our power as women, some of us also reclaimed earth-centered or goddess-centered spirituality, and one of our first interest groups was our pagan or earth-based religion group. Our Fellowship has had a very large and active pagan group in the past, but our humanist group was by far the most influential: I remember a time when words like "worship" or "prayer" or "god" caused gasping, cringing, and heated debate. Within Unitarianism as a whole in the past, congregations west of the Mississippi were often referred to as the "non-goddess;" in the east Unitarian groups were much closer to our Christian roots.

In 1961 came our merger with the Universalists. I know most of you know the joke about the differences between Unitarians and Universalists—but it's one of the few jokes I can remember, and I love it, so here it is again: Universalists believe that "salvation" is universal—all people are "saved," that God is too good to condemn anyone to hell; on the other hand, Unitarians believe **they** are too good for God to condemn to hell. The kernel of truth in that joke is that Unitarians have a reputation for being somewhat elitist, believing themselves superior to anyone who continues to "believe" the irrationality of mainstream religions in the face of the advancements in science. But if some of us here have been inclined to criticize our religiously-conservative neighbors in the past, those neighbors have also been suspicious and critical of us.

And we have not always loved our broader UU organizations as well as we have loved our fellow members here—and likewise, they—the district, regional and national levels of UUs—have not always treated us so fondly—but it's time for all that to be water under the bridge. In the words of Morrie Schwartz from the book and play, Tuesdays with Morrie, based on the real-life story of Professor Schwartz and his former student, Mitch Albom: "Life is short; forgive everyone for everything."

But just a couple more facts those of you who are relatively new to the congregation may not know: first, in 1987, I had just moved here from the UU congregation in Waco, and UU congregations everywhere were still buzzing about the fact that the FBI was investigating us—to be correct, investigating the UUA. Shortly after Daniel Ellsberg leaked

The Pentagon Papers to the New York *Times* in 1971, the UUA publishing company, Beacon Press, published them in book form. Those documents showed that the U. S. President had lied for years not only to the public but also to Congress about the scope of U.S. military activities in and around Vietnam. It wasn't until 2011 that those documents were declassified and the entire report made available. But I remember being proud to be a UU then, and proud of that publication, and proud of being investigated. That's the risk we take when we are willing to "speak truth to power." And this is an important part of who we are, who we have always been, standing up for social justice. Social justice work is part of what gives meaning to our lives.

The second event I want to mention is this: around 1986-1987, this congregation was again at one of our peaks in membership and attendance, and the UUA offered to help us pay for a full-time minister—and picked the minister. At least we were unaware if we had any input in the selection. The minister who came here was not a good fit for our congregation—we fired her after about a year. It took us fifteen years to be ready to again have a minister.

Starting in 2004, in a series of congregational meetings, we decided that we needed to grow, and believed we needed a minister to help us do that. We were motivated by the fact that our median age then was about 60, and there were no young people, no children, among us. However, after we had fired the minister the UUA had so generously sent us, the SW District Director at the time had trouble believing we were serious about wanting a minister. She insisted on coming here to talk with us personally—and then gave us several arduous assignments to complete before she would agree to send us applications from ministers.

We made ourselves ready to change in order to more fully affirm and promote our principles in our wider community—the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another, and all the rest of our wonderful principles.

Now here's the most important thing I have to say today: The most valuable thing this congregation has to offer, to each other, to our wider community, to visitors, is our beloved community—the identity Reverend Green so aptly gave us. By the way, have you noticed the quote by David in this month's scrolling Sunday morning quotes? He said, "Love whoever is around you who needs loving." It was in one of his sermons. Love whoever is around you who needs loving. And we hit the ministerial jackpot with David. He did more for us than we even hoped for—he vastly improved our credibility and respectability with our religiously conservative neighbors. He helped us double the size of our congregation while he was here. Anytime you need to make a gratitude list, add "having David here" to it.

But as I said, I want us to keep getting better. I want us to commit to continue to offer our community, our acceptance of each other faults and all, our compassion, our forgiveness, to each other and to every person who enters our doors.

And here's why it is so important that we do this: The Reverend Peter Morales, current President of the UUA, in a book titled [The Growing Church: Keeping Congregations Vital](#), claims that "Americans today are the most isolated people in human history. . . . A study published in June 2006 in the American Sociological Review shows a decline in close relationships so large and so rapid that the data shocked sociologists. The findings were so shocking they were picked up by publications like the New York *Times*. The study was a duplication of one done twenty years earlier, in

order to compare the changes over two decades . . . The percentage of people who said they had no one with whom they could confide jumped from one person in ten in 1985, which is bad enough, to one in four in 2004."

Social support is critical to our physical and emotional health—and so ultimately to the health and well-being of our whole society. The human need to belong is right next to our need for food, water, shelter and security. We cannot be healthy people—we cannot be a healthy society—we cannot be a healthy congregation without supportive human relationships. But this was what David saw in us—that we were already truly a beloved community.

Reverend Morales lists as causes of our culture's growing loneliness our high level of mobility, the erosion of our neighborhoods, the isolating character of the automobile, and TV and the Internet, which, while appearing to connect people, actually impede intimate personal engagement. Add to this the fact that more than one-fourth of all American households are now single-person households—I am one of those—I agree about the loneliness.

But here is also our opportunity to help others: Morales also states that UU congregations, over a year's time, receive more visitors than we have members—and that these visitors, because we live in a virtual world now, already know how we think, because they've been to our website or the UUA website. Our visitors, he says, don't come expecting Bible study or in flight from fundamentalism—they come hoping to fill the human need to belong. Morales says, "The fundamental question in the minds and hearts of visitors . . . is affective and tribal: 'Are these my people?'"

People need other people. People make other people better. A Willie Nelson song says, "Love's the greatest healer to be found."

Those of us who have been here for 20, 30, even 40 years, have found healing here. We have been loved into healing. Some of us have come here with DSM-diagnosable conditions—and we have found an amazing wholeness over the years in this loving community. I want us to offer what we have to every visitor who comes through our doors.

Wendell Berry, a much-awarded novelist, poet, environmental activist, and cultural critic, has said, "Healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing." I've been so excited to learn how many of us are looking for a minister with a sense of humor! This congregation has routinely mixed business with fun. We have been able to laugh at ourselves, at our human predicament, and even our stumbling steps to spiritual growth. We enjoy each other's company, and those are great things!

Jean Vanier, Catholic philosopher, theologian, and humanitarian, says, in Community and Growth: "One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing."

George Bernard Shaw said, "I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can." (Coffee drinkers—take note—sign up to make it once in a while—someone will teach you how it's done, and you'll usually have company here—you may even get a key to the building! The important thing is, since you're doing something for others, you will experience something wonderful! From many

years of volunteer service here myself, I can promise you, it will feel better to give back to this beloved community, than it feels to drink the coffee someone else here has made for you! But that's pretty good, too!

William Arthur Ward, a popular Methodist inspirational writer, has said: "Do more than belong: participate. Do more than believe: practice. Do more than be fair: be kind. Do more than forgive: forget. Do more than dream: work."

And here is one last reading, a poem by Debasish Banerji –he has written such provocative sounding works as Seven Quartets of Being—A Transformative Yoga of Psychology, and Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures. This reminds me of Rumi:

To feel the joy too much:

Let us trust too much,

Let us love too much,

Let us hope too much,

And let us belong too much.

In closing, my tribe, my people, my beloved community—let us re-commit ourselves to each other and to every person who enters here: we will offer ourselves, our love, our emotional support—we will welcome and value, we will accept and embrace, we will forgive each other seventy times seven and we will forget, and we will continue to find here the sacred—the sacredness of self-transcendence, the sacredness of our connectedness. I am happy we are all here!

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