

CONTAGIOUS WHOLENESS

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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You may have noticed that I arranged the children's story so that they could look over my shoulder and see the wonderful illustrations by Cynthia Aldrich, which convey the idea that we are all part of a whole pattern of being that includes and yet transcends us: "I am part of all I see, and all I see is part of me." What a simple and utterly charming idea . . . and yet so much of our lives and the lives of our children convey the idea that we are separate from one another and from our surrounding world. We long for wholeness but we are surrounded by a culture that promotes separateness. How can we transcend the boundaries of a culture that is obsessed with self-fulfillment defined as **self-serving** fulfillment?

Many of the traditional models of spiritual development are based on the vertical image of a **ladder** that extends **upward** from lower to higher. The most familiar metaphor is that of many paths leading to the peak of a mountain. This image draws heavily on the masculine concern with hierarchy: higher levels are superior to lower levels. Let me suggest an alternative metaphor: a **circle** that expands outward. This image is drawn mainly from feminist spirituality and from the wisdom traditions of Asia. Instead of focusing on lower-to-higher, this model of spiritual development is circular, expanding **outward** from the self to include and embrace the ever-wider circles of family, congregation, local community, nation, and world community. This is the perspective that guides my discussion of wholeness: from the **inside out**, starting with the search for wholeness in oneself. The journey toward wholeness begins with the self, but it certainly does not end there.

In my sermon on wholeness last month, I suggested that the pursuit of wholeness begins not from our idealistic desire for self-perfection, but from the humble acknowledgement of our **imperfections**. The authors of the book titled *The Spirituality of Imperfection* say that, "Among those who accept their imperfection there seems to be a special sense of likeness or oneness in their very flawedness. . . . In such a context of *shared weakness*, qualities in other people that might, in different circumstances, irritate or anger instead elicit compassion and identification.

Shared weakness: *the shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged.* That’s where we connect.” [Kurtz & Ketcham, pp. 198-99] That sort of confession of personal weakness seems to be crucial as a starting point for recovery from self-destructive addiction.

That said, let me also suggest that we shouldn’t rely **only** on the experience of recovering addicts, which is based on acknowledging our weakness, in understanding what wholeness is about. The journey toward wholeness also involves identifying our **strengths**. This is the central theme of what has become known as **positive psychology**, which I discussed in my talk about happiness on December 4th, and Sharon Van Name also talked about last Sunday in the context of New Year’s resolutions. In order to pursue this theme in greater depth and detail, I have decided to postpone the adult religious education class on world religions that I had planned for the next two months. In its place, I would like to lead an adult study group on “The Pursuit of Happiness,” starting this Wednesday at 7 p.m. This study group will be based on Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. I am excited about the possibilities this class will offer.

The most glaring weakness of the positive psychology movement is that it views the search for happiness as primarily an **individual pursuit**. This reflects the Western bias toward self-fulfillment as the highest goal of life. For example, one of the most well-known models of motivation is Abraham Maslow’s five-step hierarchy of needs, which places the need for social acceptance (love, a sense of belonging) **below** the needs for self-esteem and self-actualization. The Duke University authors of the book *The Search for Meaning* ask pointedly, “Is the actualization of our selves the highest human attainment? We think not. We live in a radically individualized culture, which tends to act as if there is no more important life project than the care and feeding of our detached selves. Yet where is this ‘self’ that is a ‘self’ apart from and without relation to others? Genuine community may be our highest and most difficult human attainment.” [Thomas H. Naylor, William H. Willimon, & Magdalena R. Naylor, *The Search for Meaning*, p. 129]

Unfortunately, the word *community* has been so overused that it has lost much of its meaning. We hear people speak of the “business community,” the “gay community,” the “black community,” even the “Harley-Davidson community”—as if everyone in these “communities” think alike and interact with one another on a regular basis. The authors of *The Search for Meaning* ask, “How do we know whether a particular group is a community or not? A

community is a partnership of free people committed to the care and nurturing of each other's mind, body, heart, and soul through participatory means. Because we are separated, we can never fully experience another's pain or pleasure. However, through community we can show empathy for another's search for meaning by suspending our own frame of reference so that we may confront the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional world of the other." [Naylor et al., p. 128]

What I want to suggest today is that we as a faith community are uniquely qualified to offer the experience of genuine community to one another and to others who are searching for a more meaningful experience of community. In a little book titled *Growing a Beloved Community*, UU minister Tom Owen-Towle identifies twelve hallmarks of a healthy congregation. [Refer to newsprint on easel.] I am not going to discuss all twelve of these hallmarks this morning—thank goodness!—but I would like to call attention to a few of these hallmarks that relate most directly to what I'm talking about.

2 Welcome all souls. People who come to our congregations are searching for a new spiritual home and the experience of community that goes with that. Peter Morales, current president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, says, "If a church is indifferent to a newcomer, it feels cold. Visitors sense right away whether that is the atmosphere, or if the congregation feels like a club run by and for the old-timers. Think of your own experience. Recall a time when you have walked into a room full of strangers. How long does it take you to sense whether you are welcome? [Peter Morales, "Welcoming," in Thom Belote (ed.), *The Growing Church*, p. 59] (Share my experiences as a newcomer in Fredericksburg and Boston.) How welcome do newcomers feel in this Fellowship? During the discussion following my talk, I invite those of you who are recent newcomers to share your experiences.

5 Encourage unity amidst diversity. Thanks mainly to our Universalist heritage, we profess our willingness to welcome people into our congregations not only without regard to their demographic identity (race, sexual orientation, etc.) but also without regard to their religious beliefs or disbeliefs. In this regard, we are unique among American faith communities. As Tom Owen Towle says, "Unitarian Universalism boldly declares that diversity is the reality of our contemporary world and that attempting to establish a monolithic culture or dominant world religion is not only inhumane but also doomed to failure. Religious pluralism is the

optimal way to create and sustain a society that is hospitable to the stranger and compassionate of all living things. But first we've got to incarnate this noble vision in our own households." [p. 40] We say that diversity is an asset to our experience of community, but is that our practice? Do we not only tolerate but **welcome** opinions that may challenge some of most cherished beliefs?

8 Spread our good news. Healthy congregations, says Tom Owen-Towle, "motivate members to claim, clarify, and communicate our liberal religious gospel along the byways of our lives. . . . Our assignment is to tell friends of the heart or strangers on the road not only what Unitarian Universalism means in general but also how it has challenged or comforted us on our particular sojourns. We need to boldly talk about the ways in which liberal religion influences our work life, our ethical commitments, and our family bonds." [pp. 58-59] We UUs are notoriously reluctant to promote our faith, especially in an area such as ours where nontraditional beliefs are widely and sometimes deliberately misunderstood. In such a place as this, our quiet actions can speak louder than the words of our disapproving neighbors.

I am reminded of the tale of the contest between an elephant and a thrush. "The elephant boasted that she could make herself heard the farther, and invited the thrush to accept the challenge. The thrush did. Then the elephant raised her trunk and sent forth a piercing blast. The thrush quietly sang her song. The judges went forth to find out how far each had been heard. On and on they went until no one could hear the elephant's sound any longer. Yet, they could still hear ever so softly the song of the thrush. 'How could the thrush's song carry farther than the elephant's [mighty] cry?' asked the judges. Softly the little bird explained, 'The thrush family has sentinels throughout the forest; and when one sings, another takes up the song, and then another and another. So they pass it along until it's carried throughout the land.'" [Owen-Towle, p. 64]

Like the song of the thrushes, our message is quiet and simple but hopefully contagious: We are one human family. We are part of a universe that embraces all of us if we will only recognize our connection to one another and to all living things. This is the vision of wholeness that we have to offer. In the words of Lauralyn Bellamy:

If, here, you have found freedom, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams, help one another, that they may come true!

If you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

And so I ask, is this a vision that you are willing to embrace as your own and make contagious to others?