

THE FABRIC OF COMMUNITY

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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[INTRO STORY]

Whenever folks come to our Newcomer Seminar, the first question I ask them is, “What brings you to our Fellowship at this time in your life journey?” Of course each story is different, but there are also certain recurring themes. They often say that they have gone through a period of self-imposed exile from organized religion. Earlier in life, they began to question the beliefs that were offered to them in the religion of their upbringing, or else—more frequent now among younger generations—they had little or no religious upbringing. In either case, they now feel ready to explore spiritual issues once again, but on their own terms. This renewed interest in religion may come from within, or it may arise from their desire to expose their children to a faith community that encourages people to learn about many different traditions and form their own opinions. They want to be part of a faith community that is **cohesive without being coercive**.

The longing for a sense of community that is cohesive but not coercive has proven to be an elusive dream for most Americans. In 2000 Robert Putnam published a book titled *Bowling Alone*, which documented dramatic declines in “involvement in civic associations, membership in churches and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and friends and neighbors, philanthropic giving, even simple trust in other people—as well as participation in . . . bowling leagues” that gave the book its title. [Robert D. Putnam & Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together*, p. 4] “Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures—and how we may reconnect. He warns that our stock of **social capital**—the very fabric of our connections with each other—has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities. . . . Community well-being simply had to do with the **quality of the relationships**, the cohesion that exists among its citizens. He calls this **social capital**.” [Peter Brock, *Community*, p. 17]

Robert Putnam’s next book was titled *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, in which he offers examples of successful community-building efforts in a wide variety of settings. He also introduces an important new distinction in the quest for community: **bonding versus bridging**. “Some networks link people who are similar in crucial respects and tend to be inward-looking—**bonding** social capital. Others encompass different types of people and tend to be outward-looking—**bridging** social capital. Both bonding and bridging social networks have their uses. Bonding social capital is a kind of sociological Super Glue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. If you get sick, the people who bring you chicken soup are likely to represent your **bonding** social capital. On the other hand, a society that has *only* bonding social capital will [be] segregated into mutually hostile camps.” [pp. 2-3] This seems to be a useful way to understand the disturbing polarization that is fed by our bipolar political system and amplified by our conflict-driven media.

In our quest for community, we need all the help we can find. This past summer, while grazing in a small New England bookstore, I stumbled on a book titled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, by Peter Brock. Here are some of the nuggets of wisdom in this book: “Build the social fabric and transform the isolation within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole.” [p. 177]

“The small group is the unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging.” [p. 178]

“The new context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of fear, mistakes, and self-interest. [p. 178]

How might these insights apply to our Fellowship as a community? Most of our members come here seeking an experience of **bonding**—a community that offers encouragement and support in their quest for a meaningful spiritual life. “Our congregations need to be places where connection can be made, networks that connect people to each other in meaningful ways. . . . The congregation that understands its purpose in terms of offering people a place to grow and change and to make connections will also be a congregation that understands itself to be an organic entity that also grows and experiences transformation. . . . Every person brings a different set of experiences and expectations and ways of doing things to the mix. The result will always be different, surprising, and vital.” [UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, p. 13] Based on my conversations with our new members, I welcome their potential to contribute in new ways to the vitality of our Fellowship. I would say that as a bonding community, we are doing pretty well.

That said, I challenge all of us—newer members, longer-term members, and myself—to become a **bridging** community as well. What does that mean? “A vital, growing, changing congregation is bound to look outward as well as inward. In addition to supporting the spiritual growth and deepening faith of individual members, it will always be asking the question about how it fits into the larger community. By words and deeds that are visible and audible, a healthy congregation shows people what Unitarian Universalism is at its best. You might say this is the most powerful form of evangelism: demonstrating the possibilities that liberal religion offers simply by being the way we are in the world.” [*Belonging*, p.13]

Woody Allen once said that “Eighty percent of success is showing up.” Our daily lives are the most powerful witness of our values, and yet we seem reluctant to express to others the faith tradition that undergirds our actions. As Michael Durall says in his book *The Almost Church*, “We seem to be comfortable telling friends about good movies, books, and restaurants, but not about a good church. Many UUs also rarely, if ever, speak of their spiritual journeys or their faith. We need to overcome this reluctance. This is not strident evangelism, but rather sharing heartfelt examples of the meaning of [our UU faith] in our lives.” [p.40]

Reverend Gordon McKeeman has served as a mentor to me for many years. Here is some of what he has to say about interpreting our faith to others. “Perhaps the single most important thing to remember is that your faith is a larger faith, a liberal or more generous faith, and that we believe **more**, not less, than others. . . . We believe more about God. I am often amazed at the certitude with which some people are able to describe God, fix his attitudes, identify his expectations, tell what is pleasing to him and what is displeasing, what kind of conduct he demands and what kind he rejects, and in a host of ways pinpoint his character. It

further amazes me that such people are certain that God's truth is to be found in only one book, revealed in only one person, preserved for the faithful in only one church. We believe more about God than that. We believe that fragments of the truth are to be found in many books, that God is revealed in many persons, that such truth as has been discovered is preserved in the rites, customs and writings of many faiths. We believe that such exclusive notions which limit God to our comprehensions and our insights are a form of juvenile parochialism which we need to outgrow. . . .

"We believe more about Jesus, too. I know that some will say, 'But you think of him as only a man!' This is derogatory both to Jesus and to man. We see the significance of Jesus, not in his paying the price for our salvation, but as an example of the heights to which human beings may aspire in their own lives. Here we see the height of love and forgiveness, the height of devotion and commitment, the height of the power of the human spirit to oppose evil; and the sublime possibilities of human life revealed. . . .

"Further, we believe more about [humankind]. We do not despair of the human venture. We believe deeply in the possibilities inherent in us and in others. . . . We, every one of us, interpret our faith more effectively by our lives, by our attitudes, by our quality of life, than in any other way. What inner resources of strength and faith we have to carry us over the difficulties that beset us, what courage we exhibit in the face of disaster and anxiety and death, what hopes we hold high when all others cry despair: these are the truly eloquent ways we speak of our faith to others. Do we not interpret our faith in our visible concerns for our community, in our willingness to give of ourselves, in our continuing and unflagging devotion to the welfare of all the members of the human family better than by our talk of believing more? If we truly believe more, it will become apparent by reason of the fact that we do more than others." [Gordon B. McKeeman, *Kept Afloat by a Millstone*, pp. 30-33]

This is the faith upon which our tradition is founded. May it serve as both a **bond** that unites us a community and as a **bridge** that connects us to an ever-widening community of our brothers and sisters around the globe. In the words of Theodore Parker, "Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the food heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living."