

COMMUNITY, CONNECTION, RELATIONSHIP, REFLECTION:
DROPS OF WATER TURN A MILL

Greetings! In our service on Sunday, 16. August

Let's start with the words of the Sweet Honey in the Rock song we heard as our prelude today. "Step by step the longest march, can be won, can be won, drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none..." For me, those words sum up the deeper meaning of our traditional annual UU Ingathering/Water Communion. And, as it happens, the idea that we can move the world more when we join together than when we are just individual droplets of water was also a major theme of the Unitarian retreat in Mainz which I attended in May. Jörg Last, one of their theme speakers, actually said something about **all** of the different Unitarian movements world-wide coming together to form a mighty stream of tolerance and understanding.

As we join our ladles of water together, **we** join together. We celebrate and remember that we are a **community**, united by our common UU values (it's always worth reviewing them to help us live them better): the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Justice, equity, compassion in human relations. Acceptance and encouragement to spiritual growth. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of

conscience and the use of democratic process. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. And, respect for the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part. We UUs may not have a creed, but we are not, as is sometimes accused of us, simply “anything goes.” We are joined by agreeing to these 7 core principals and accepting that we find our truths in our 6 Sources – and by agreeing to disagree on such issues as fundamental as whether or not there is anything bigger than ourselves, a kind of “god,” call it what you will, out there in the universe at all. Each ladle of water joins the others together in our pitcher, and that water becomes a united resource that can reach out an invitation of welcome to all.

We are indeed a welcoming community. UU’s are a global community that welcomed, through the First UU Church congregation of San Diego, our little family in 2003. Darrel and I were searching for an ethical community without the religious baggage of the Lutheran and Catholic traditions we had grown up in, a place where our son would find people he wanted to emulate and respect when he hit the teen years and we became the most embarrassing people on the planet. You may have noticed at services we’ve reached that stage of our lives. (It’s okay, that’s normal and we don’t mind! We admit, we can be embarrassing!)

That community in San Diego got us through my treatment and cure for breast cancer, and supported us in many complex and

sometimes agonizing decisions of the serious life kind beyond that, too. Just like we are finding this WUU and EEU community does for us now. We are so grateful for that and continue to need it!

And, we hope that as often as we can, that we bring listening ears, helping hands, thoughtful minds, and supportive actions to this community, as needed. When I was overwhelmed with the needs of my family of origin in New York last year, this community supported me and waited for me. Now that things have settled down, it is both an honor and a joy to be able to contribute more again.

Such welcoming community is also needed in today's global world, according to Peter Morales, president of the UU Association of North America in his summer message in the UU World magazine. He notes the unprecedented rate of change in religion today, "particularly...the explosion of the 'nones' – those with no religious identity at all." He adds that, "One way of thinking about the changes in religion today is to view them as an enormous problem. Another way to think of our situation is that there is a spiritual hunger, and that millions upon millions of unaffiliated people constitute a breath-taking opportunity. "

We have a message, and a community, that the world needs. UU's historically are not exactly the proselytizing kind, and that's okay. But, it's not okay for us to "hide our light under a bushel," to quote one of our many sources of wisdom. As

members of a community that meets our own needs in whatever ways keep *us* coming back, we owe it to the hurting world to be open about the good we have found.

This is where genuine **connection** comes into play. To me, the difference between proselytizing and sharing something others might genuinely need comes from being able to be a good listener, with an open mind, no hidden agenda, simply hearing what a friend or acquaintance is saying and responding in a genuine way. If that way happens to include that we think they can find what they're looking for in our UU fellowship, so be it. If not, hey, that's okay too. As Rev. Meg Riley of the CLF said in one of her messages, sometimes we have to practice asking and graciously accepting a "no" answer if it comes. Done with genuine, respectful caring for the other person, it can't hurt, and might help. To me, it is part of our UU responsibility to heal the hurt in this world.

When we are connected to others in a genuine, open way, focused on them, not trying to get our own needs met, we can come into right relationship with them. (There's a time and a place for getting our needs met too, in our community, and of course this has to happen before we can reach out...water communion is just one affirmation of meeting our own needs first), And, when we seek to give to our UU community when and how we can, and graciously accept receiving what we need from our UU community so that we are whole and strong in the world, we are in right relationship with each other. And, some

might say, with god, goddess, the great mystery, whatever you conceive that unknown power that might be out there that is bigger than any one of us and somehow found in all of us. (At least, that's my take on it, grin.)

So how do we connect with each other first? One way in which we are joined is by sharing our stories. As Christine Organ notes in her "Connections" column in the summer issue of the UUA magazine, "We all have our stories...polite, 'small talk' stories that we share around the water cooler at work, or during coffee hour after Sunday service. We have half-truth stories, and stories that we wish were true. We have family stories, stories we hide...and stories we share with our congregations. Sharing our stories helps us connect with ourselves, our spirituality, and others..." When we are in a sacred space together, when we have gotten to know and trust each other with our hearts, we can share the stories that bring us pain as well as joy, the real stories that *are* our lives.

We visited some dear friends in the Netherlands last week, friends we've known since our days in South Africa way back in the 90s. An older couple with no children, they delighted in telling us how they remodeled their new apartment, and they delighted in having our eyes gaze again at their wonderful collection of African art. We shared those deep and sometimes disconcerting thoughts about getting older, retirement, finding purpose and a new routine. We all smiled a lot, and relaxed into the easy flow of friendship as they toured us around their new

home town. Their stories, and ours, created congregation in the human sense of the word: we gathered together and were renewed, just as this congregation gathers together and is renewed.

To paraphrase Christine Organ, “With each word spoken, the knots of guilt and shame unravel a little. With each nod from the congregation (or members of it), new connections are made. With each idea shared, the congregation (or member/s) and the story teller step further into the sacred space that we call spiritual community.” Only through the reflected gazes of others do our experiences, hobbies, passions, possessions and ideological positions become meaningful. (This also explains the current social media phenomenon of “memes” like Grumpy Cat, and Such LOL Dog.)

When sharing our stories, and listening to the stories of others, one of the most important elements of communication we can use is eye contact. As an elementary school teacher and a parent, I can tell almost immediately when I’m forgetting to do that at home or in the classroom. Suddenly I’ll have 10 kids seeking attention in inappropriate ways. And I remind myself of the magical watchwords of both parenting and teaching: Connect before you direct. We can listen only after we feel respected and connected to each other.

Yes, sharing our stories is a risk. Yes, it takes courage. Yes, we each have to do it in our own time. And it is part of community,

part of connection, part of what we bring to WUU and part of what we receive from WUU.

This is why activities like our field trips, our coffee hour, our worship, and our EUU retreats, with time for guitar playing, singing, story sharing and unstructured fellowship are so important to our community's strength. I think our WUU plan to have annual steering committee "mini retreats" is awesome! When we participate in any or all of the above, we give to others and we receive much in return. I'm sure I'm not the only one who goes home feeling all warm, fuzzy, comforted, and rejuvenated after such events, am I? I feel connected to this community each time we worship together, each time I am able to attend an event like our summer Solstice picnic and blather on about Shakespeare, each time I chat with people new or old at coffee hour.

Especially for those of you who may be newer to the UU tradition, you may ask yourself: how do we *remain* in right relationship within our community? Well, there's no easy answer. This is where **reflection** comes in. There's no creed you have to believe, there are no specific steps you need to take, you're not asked to tithe a certain percent of your income. But, you are asked to be present: to trust the best intentions of your fellow UU's, to give what you can, according to your talents and abilities. To volunteer to hand out the order of service, read the story for all ages – it can be as simple as that. Or perhaps, if you can, to serve on a committee like the worship committee or the

steering committee, or contribute to the army base that houses us by participating in an interfaith activity so we give back for what we get from here, too. Or maybe to educate yourself more about the world-wide UU and Unitarian movements, because the more our drops of water come together, the stronger we can be to support each other, and to help make the world a better place. After all, a UU fellowship is a religious community among many such communities. And all the word “religious” really means is “regular”. To practice something religiously is to do it actively, on a regular basis. That’s it. And, if you are ready to sign the book and be a member, that comes with responsibilities as well as rights. Becoming a UU is joining a practice. Without all of us giving what we can, when we can, we could not be who we are. We could not help each other when we need to be on the receiving end of fellowship – and we all have those times in our lives. If you’re like me, there’s not a lot of extended family you can count on, for one reason or another – so in some ways, the UU community fills that gap. As do many churches, for many people of many faiths.

To relate back to our water communion theme, and draw on another source of wisdom, the Tao Te Ching says: “The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with the low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the Tao. In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep it simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don’t try to control. In family life, be completely present. When

you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect you."

Yes, here is where reflection comes in. We all need alone time, labyrinth time, thoughtful time. Yet so often, we do not make space for that time in our lives: for yoga, meditation, long walks alone or with the dog, even an exercycle session at the gym, can be a time when we are alone with our thoughts and reflections if we allow it. So how do we allow it? Stay off social media...let the email wait....don't watch the trashy talk shows on the gym TV screens...don't listen to music, not even the classical kind without words. Just let yourself be with yourself – possibly the hardest thing for many of us high-achievers to do. But, vitally important to staying focused on what is truly meaningful and real to us. And staying connected to what is truly meaningful and connected to us is key to staying connected to each other.

For me, the urge to accomplish, to achieve, is very strong. It is hard for me to relax, to feel I am enough if I simply am who I am. For me, the UU faith helps me find that balance between activism, activity, achievement, and enough, emotions, eternity. Another way to say, human connections, in practice. And that truly is enough. The town of Bad Homburg, where we live, participates each year in a public art installation called Blickacksen. The art ranges from the traditional to the absurd – a shipping container supported somehow upright on one edge, for example – or two huge plastic 60s style pop-art wursts, one whole and laying atop another that is cut in half, one of its

wursty eyeballs floating in the nearby pond...with the title, “Dabei sein ist alles.” Being there is everything. To be honest, I wasn’t sure whether it was a case of “Ist das Kunst oder kann das weg?” But, the title captivated me. Being there is everything. That, to me, is truth spoken to power.

So...we belong to this community, we connect with it voluntarily. We give what we can, we ask for what we need. We practice our faith religiously. We enter into relationship and honor those ties. We willingly reflect on our intentions, our actions, our impact on others and the world. To quote Peter Morales again, we practice “Empathy. Compassion. Humility. Letting go. Playfulness. Courage. Passion. Facing the truth. Embracing failure.”

Embracing failure? Oh yes! Because if we are going to seize this historic opportunity of which Morales speaks, and try to reach out to people who might need us (of course, we need them too – more water drops to turn the mills for those committees!) – we are going to have to try a lot of things, and those attempts won’t all be successful. This is where reflection comes in again. To quote Morales once more: “...before we innovate and experiment, we need to engage in serious spiritual discipline. We must set out with open hearts to hear and feel what spiritual hunger the religiously homeless people around us feel. What do they long for? What is missing? If normal congregational life is not feeding them [whatever ‘normal’ means – my edit!] – what will? Empathy and compassion are

the foundation. An open heart is more important than a clever mind. Humility helps.”

When I am overwhelmed by work or extended family, I feel that sense of failure – perhaps not because I have tried something that did not work, but because I am not strong enough to focus on the spiritual that brings humanity forward when I am bogged down in the practical and emotional everyday challenges, like many of us. That is my personal challenge: to remain true to my UU aspirations when I feel overwhelmed by everyday life.

What’s yours? We can help each other, where ever we may be.

Community. Connection. Relationship. Reflection. Drops of water turn a mill, singly none. I’ll end with that, and offer these questions to open our discussion:

1. What do you need from this community? What do you bring to it?
2. How do you feel connected to this community? How would you like to see this community connect to the broader UU/Unitarian movement, and the world?
3. What strengths can you bring to relationship building in this community? What challenges (weaknesses) can this community help you with?
4. How do you make the time to reflect on these issues and aspects of community, both in the context of WUU and EEU events, and in your daily life?