

New member Sunday, the day when we celebrate our new members and welcome them in as part of our community. Some are newer than others to us; some have been with us for awhile and we may even find it a little odd to welcome them as “new”. But, in each case, each person here has made a commitment to this church, to this community, and to themselves, to be committed, to be part of a community. And so, today, I’d like to talk a little about community, both its demands and its rewards.

Unitarian-Universalism has been both praised and criticized for its emphasis on individual rights. Our first principle says, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Every person. Each individual has worth and dignity. It can be hard for all of us to find worth and dignity in *all* people. It can be hard for us to overcome our prejudices, our feelings of outrage, our horror at the actions of many people in order to live up to our first principle and affirm their worth and dignity despite their actions. It can be still harder, much harder, in our midnight moments, to find worth and dignity within ourselves. We all need affirmation; we all need support. For all of us, even those who feel invincible now, there will come a time, or times, when we, too, need a hand up, a kind word, encouragement and trust.

And it is this that brings us to the way in which we govern ourselves. We ask of everyone here that we join in a process that says we trust each other to form a

community, to engage in the give and take of real democracy, to know that one person never has all the answers but that all of us together can move mountains, leap mighty obstacles and, even, build a church. This is, I believe, the message of the fifth and sixth principles, the right of conscience and the democratic process and the goal of a world community which will reflect that.

The reason that we strive to do this is summed up in our seventh, and newest, principle. “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” What we do matters. Like that butterfly we hear so much about, whose beating wings cause hurricanes, our actions affect everyone. Our actions create the world we want or create a world we cannot live in.

However, I think it is getting harder and harder to see the effect of our actions. Increasingly, we can feel insignificant, irrelevant, helpless and hopeless. It is a big world and a frustratingly complicated world. In the name of efficiency, or cost savings, each person is pushed to the margins of effectiveness. We are asked to trust people we do not know with decisions that will affect our lives, often deeply and radically. We often do not feel we are able make a difference within this large, impersonal world. And so we look to others, those we feel are more able than we are. I find this a disturbing trend.

I first noticed this when I saw comic books or books of paper dolls for adults that featured some of our political leaders. Whether they featured Obama or McCain, Clinton or Trump, there was always a part in which the politician dressed in superhero costume. I thought, Oh, boy, we're in trouble now. For one thing, not all politicians should wear tights. But, aesthetics aside, the idea that our politicians now have to be more than human, superhuman, before they are able to tackle the problems of our times is really disturbing.

The point of democracy is that we trust ourselves, not a distant and unknown leader, to solve our problems. A quick look at history shows us the danger in trusting to a politician for any ultimate solutions, trusting to someone whose own agenda will always trump the will of the people. A leader's power rises in inverse proportion to the confidence of the people to lead themselves, to propose solutions, to compromise, to keep in mind the good of all people in their decisions. As people are more overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness, the seduction becomes greater to give over control to someone who says they can take care of everything, someone who appears to have all the answers.

Where do we learn to trust ourselves? Where do we learn to have inner strength, inner courage? And where do we learn that, though we may have the courage of our convictions, others do as well? How do we learn to learn from each

other, to engage in the process of reasoning together, to arrive at solutions that can further this community? In our fourth principle, we say that we support a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. But we support that within a community so that everyone has a part in this search. No one here has all the answers.

Everyone here has part of the answer.

We struggle to create a community that does not ask us to conform. We struggle to create a community that allows each of us to develop ourselves, to find that we have skills and abilities that we didn't know we had. I know this is something that this community helped me to do and I hope that is what happens for each person here. Those goals are surely what the second and third principles are all about, justice, equity and compassion in human relations and acceptance on one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

How do we be both individuals and members of a community? How do we increase in confidence, be aware of our own strengths and able to act on those strengths? How do we blend our ideas and convictions to create the beloved community?

In this large and often incomprehensible world, there is more need than ever for meeting each other face to face, not because we are like-minded, as we

sometimes say, but because we are not. It is easy to like someone who thinks just like we do, but much harder to grow by understanding a different point of view.

In this impersonal world, there is also a great need for human contact, for the give and take of everyday life, for knowing each other, not just as a picture on a Facebook page but as real, living people, with, as we say every Sunday, joys and sorrows, for knowing each other not always at our best but also at our worst, our most vulnerable. This hunger for human contact is the reason that many mega-churches have started a small church movement, a church within a church. As you can see, we are ahead of the crowd. We discovered the small group movement in 1906.

We can see easily the conflict between the needs and demands of our individual lives, and the needs and demands of community life but we often do not see how both are related. But they are intimately intertwined. A community that is responsive to the needs of its members increases each person's well-being. This is true in this church setting and it is true in the wider world as well. If we rely on distant, mythical figures to build our community, it is not a community that is relevant to us.

If we do not work to build our own communities, we will never gain the skills that we gain by doing this work. We are not often asked to be leaders in other

settings. Here we have the ability to try our wings in new roles. We have the opportunity to reach inside ourselves and find there is more to us than what we thought there was. When we do this, not for our own benefit, not to feel we are important, but to help each other, then we can look at our work and know that it is good. Our self-confidence can be rooted in deep soil, not in shallow self-regard, but in knowing that we have created something that is both our own efforts and yet more than just ourselves.

In addition, there is nothing like a shared task to help us get to know each other. Working together, whether it's washing dishes after coffee hour, or being on a committee lets us really get to know one another.

So, though we might wish that we could magically wave a wand and have everything set right for us, we would lose a lot in the process. There is no quick and easy way to build anything that is good and true and lasting. Like the best craftsmanship, it has to be done by hand, not by machine.

So, welcome to our new members. Welcome to the shared task of building and keeping alive a body of people linked to those who are no longer on earth as well as to those yet to be born, a community stretching back in time before this church was even thought of and forward into a future we cannot imagine.

In this church, we honor the light that is within each of us. Let us gather our light together and shine our combined radiance on the path we will walk together, a path that leads us all to higher ground, each of us growing in wisdom and love, together showing to all the world a new community.