

“WHY COMMUNITY MATTERS”
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Call to Gather: from Starhawk

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.¹

Reading: “Falling Bodies” by Alice Walker

He told me
Some of them were holding hands
Leaping from
The flaming
Windows.

To these ones
Leaping, holding hands
Holding
Their own
I open
My arms.

Everything
It is
Necessary
To understand
They mastered
In the last
Rich
Moments

¹ <http://www.uubgky.org/CaringCelebration.htm>.

That
They owned.

There is no more
To learn
In life
Than this:
How to
Love and
How to miss
To waste
The moment
Our understanding
Of this
Is clear.

We are
Each other's
Own
Near and far
Far and wide
(Even if we leap
Into loving
In such haste
It is certain
There will remain
Nothing of us
Left.)

Consider: the pilot
& the
Hijacker
Might
Have been
Holding
Hands.

Those who wish
To make
A war
Of this
Will never believe
It possible.

But how enlightenment
Comes

To others
We may never
Know
Or even
How
Someday
It may come
To us.

And
If it does not come
In this lifetime
We may be hopeful
For the next.

When he tells me
This story
I look
Deep
Into my beloved's
Ear.

It is finely
Curved
Surprisingly
Small
Fleshy-on-the
Lower-outside
Miracle.

On the inside
Hairy, growing its own
Wax
It can hear!

A love of bodies
Sweeps
Over me.

And of
Soul.²

Sermon

² <http://www.wpr.org/book/poems.html>.

One of the Fellowship stories I keep circling back to is the time a dozen years ago when two members of the Fellowship were diagnosed with terminal cancer at about the same time. One, in her mid-forties, fought the cancer with everything she had. She desperately wanted to live long enough to see her daughter get through some rocky years in high school. She turned to her spiritual community for support and encouragement as she engaged in a long and arduous dance with cancer. With the help of this community and her considerable internal strengths, she lived long enough to see her daughter turn the corner.

The other Fellowship member was in a very different place in life. She was older, and had battled through an addiction that got the better of her for most of her life. About five years earlier, something had finally clicked and she entered a period of deep and good recovery from her addiction. The five years she had been in recovery seemed like a bonus to her, something she never, ever expected.

But she wasn't up for another fight with a new lethal demon, so she decided rather quickly that one round of chemotherapy and radiation would be enough, thank you very much. After this effort failed to turn back the tide of the cancer, she decided it was time to stop eating. She turned to her spiritual community for comfort and reassurance as she made these difficult choices. And the same community that supported and cheered on the other woman as she went through treatment after treatment quietly supported this woman's decision to wave the white flag. Community—this community—helped both women negotiate through the final days of their lives with grace and dignity.

Community matters. It matters a lot. It does take a village to raise a child. And it takes a village to die with grace and dignity. It takes a village to learn. It takes a village to love. It takes a village—a community—to do just about anything of importance between the bookends of our lives: birth and death.

Why is community such a powerful force?

When good things happen in our lives, community gives us fellow travelers with whom we can celebrate. When things are going badly, community gives us companions with whom we can cry. Community gives us a place to turn when the going gets tough and we are in need of affirmation and encouragement. Mark Nepo writes about a Hawaiian tradition in which

Families and friends often swim long distances together, and when one becomes injured or exhausted, the others will keep the tired one afloat, massaging them in the water before the group swims on. This act of keeping the tired one afloat while massaging their exhausted limbs is called *lomi-lomi*. They stop, tread water, and encourage their loved one to keep swimming.³

This Hawaiian tradition gives a beautiful picture of what happens over and over again in community.

Sometimes, though, we need not affirmation and encouragement as much as critique and challenge and accountability. Sometimes we're not doing the things we need to be doing to live our lives to the best of our ability. Or we're doing things we shouldn't

³ Mark Nepo, *Facing the Lion, Being the Lion: Finding Inner Courage Where It Lives* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2007), p. 90.

be doing, things which are hurting us and others. A mature community can offer us critique, challenge and accountability in these times. And a mature community will have the wisdom to know when we need affirmation and when we need challenge.

Community also helps us develop an understanding of life in general, and our lives in particular. Few if any of us truly have the interior wisdom to make sense of the world and our own individual lives entirely on our own. We're just not that smart! We need the questions and insights and experiences of others in order to make sense of things. We need to hear other people's perspectives. We need to be able to bounce ideas off other people. We see better in the company of others. I'm reminded of the Indian story of the blind men and the elephant. The Sufi poet Rumi writes a variation of the story in his poem "Elephant in the Dark:"

Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.

One by one, we go in the dark and come out
saying how we experience the animal.

One of us happens to touch the trunk.
"A water-pipe kind of creature."

Another, the ear. "A very strong, always moving
back and forth, fan-animal."

Another, the leg. "I find it still,
like a column on a temple.

Another touches the curved back.
"A leathery throne."

Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.
"A rounded sword made of porcelain."
He's proud of his description.

Each of us touches one place
and understands the whole in that way.

The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark are
how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.

If each of us held a candle there,
and if we went in together,
we could see it.⁴

⁴ Coleman Barks with John Moyne, translator, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 252.

This is certainly true on the spiritual path. If each of us has a candle, and we go in together, we can see. In a spiritual community, we learn from one another. We test out our ideas and find out if they're good enough to withstand the tests of life. We see better when we're together in community.

This is a big reason I'm part of a spiritual community. Sure, I have some moments of insight on my own, especially out in nature. I'd even say that such moments are often more potent than moments of insight I have here at the Fellowship. But this Fellowship is where I come to make sense of such moments. This is where I come to subject them to the rigors of my own and other people's understandings. Here, with your help, I make sense of life.

There are other ways community is a powerful force. It helps shape our character and values. It helps us discern whether we're on the right path for our lives. It helps us realize that we are not alone. It helps us feel and value the ties that bind us together in the web of life. It helps us feel empathy for others—and, if it is a positive and life-giving community, not just those in our community but ultimately with those who are outside it. It helps us figure out how we can use our individual gifts and talents to help build a better world. It helps fuel the fires of our passion and commitment so that we have the energy to keep on doing the work of justice.

And, finally, community helps us feel a sense of abundance. Last fall I shared Parker Palmer's interpretation of the biblical story of the loaves and the fishes. How did Jesus satisfy that crowd of thousands with a handful of loaves of bread and fish? Maybe it wasn't some hocus pocus, but rather the more common place miracle of community. Maybe Jesus' and the disciples' act of sharing their food—meager as it was—inspired others to share whatever they brought with them. Maybe this spirit of sharing and talking together helped everybody feel like they had enough. Maybe community helped them feel a sense of abundance.⁵

The trouble today is that our experiences of community are lessening in frequency and impact. The Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam's books *Bowling Alone* and *Better Together* have persuasively shown that community is waning, and that we are the worse for this trend. He provides lots of statistics. Here's one: in 1985, twenty percent of Americans didn't have any intimates outside of their family. Now that percentage is over fifty percent! So the percentage of people who don't have intimates outside their family more than *doubled* in twenty years!⁶ Combined with the mobility of the contemporary American that cuts us off from family, and you have a country of islands. Too many of us are on our own, cut off from friends, family, and community.

All of this is why what we're doing here in this spiritual community is so important. Community is absolutely central to the mission of this congregation. Since we do not come together to affirm a common spiritual belief, something else must lie at the heart of our congregation. Maybe that something is community. We believe that being in this community can help us become better people, and can help us do our small parts to build a better world.

⁵ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 107; and Palmer, *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 121-138.

⁶ Cited in Dick Meyer, *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millennium* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), pp. 24-26.

Becoming better people and helping build a better world: these are the two great quests of the human journey. Many of us came here looking for these things. Feeling like we're finding them here is why so many of us offer our time, our energy, our money, our passion—ourselves, in short—to the Fellowship. I'm always so awestruck when I think about how important this place must be for people to take on a big volunteer job or to voluntarily give three or four or five percent or more of their income to the Fellowship. No one has to do these things. To be part of the Fellowship, you don't have to generously volunteer your time. You don't have to give generously of your money to the Fellowship. And we don't entice you to be generous with the reward of eternal life in heaven. And yet, over and over people give incredibly generously of themselves. Why? I think it's because you feel that this community has the capacity to transform your lives and, in a small but important way, the world.

What helps a community such as this flourish? I'll touch briefly on five things.

First, I think that cherishing one another helps community flourish. This doesn't mean that everyone in a community must always like everyone else. In a community of 800, you're not going to like everyone! By cherishing one another, I mean that we affirm the humanity of each other. We recognize their relatedness to us. We strive to see the very best in other members of our community.

Second, openness helps community flourish. Prejudice and close-mindedness are enemies of community. We have to be open to the unique personalities, contributions and beliefs of each person in the community—including those who are very different from us.

Third is flexibility. Change is an essential part of the nature of every single human being. When we are together in community, we cannot help but bring the dynamism of our lives to the community. A healthy community evolves and grows along with its individual members. Rigidity and an unwillingness or inability to change are enemies of community.

Fourth, a community needs honesty. Each member must strive to be honest with him or herself, and then with others in the community. Denial and dishonesty sabotage community more than almost anything I can think of. Being honest includes the willingness to challenge one another and to enforce healthy boundaries when it's necessary. A community falters when its members are too polite or too scared to challenge one another.

There is one final aid in helping a community flourish: the community needs to be valued by its members. This is particularly significant for Unitarian Universalists. Because we are so inclined by tradition and philosophy to value the individual, we have chronically undervalued community. This has caused us all too often to hold back from strengthening our communities. The UU theologian Paul Rasor has a good metaphor for this: we liberals, he writes, "wade into the waters of community up to our knees, but we're afraid to let go of the dock and plunge in with our whole bodies."⁷ We need to plunge into our communities with our whole bodies. I believe that it's possible to do this and still maintain our personal autonomy and integrity. It's possible to have a strong, vibrant community which also respects the personal autonomy of each of its members. Contrary to much of our tradition, this truly is not an either/or proposition.

⁷ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), p. 178.

You know me: I love to think in metaphors. I always find it easier to understand a concept when I can see a picture of it in my mind. So in thinking about community this week—in thinking about *this* spiritual community—I cast about for a picture of it in my mind. Suddenly *Because of Winn Dixie*, the children’s book by Kate DiCamillo and the subsequent movie version of the book popped into my mind.⁸ *Because of Winn Dixie* provides a beautiful picture of community and why community matters.

The story centers on India Opal Buloni, a ten-year-old girl who with her preacher dad moves to a little town in Florida called Naomi. Opal’s mom left them some years earlier, leaving both with mounds of loneliness, guilt and grief. The movie opens with Opal playing softball alone. She has no friends in her new town. She prays aloud to God for friends.

Her prayer gets answered in an unexpected way. One day, her dad sends her to the Winn Dixie store to pick up a few things. As she shops, a mangy, stinky stray dog comes into the store. He leaves a trail of destruction in his wake as he runs through the store. Feeling pity for him, Opal blurts out to the store manager that he’s her dog. She says his name is Winn Dixie. So she takes the dog home. Her dad reluctantly agrees to keep him until they can find his original owners.

It turns out that the lovable and rascally Winn Dixie is good at making friends. He opens all sorts of doors for new friendships. So Opal becomes friends with a varied cast of characters in town: Amanda Wilkinson, the sad girl whose brother drowned the year before; Miss Franny, an elderly librarian who loves to tell stories about the old days; Sweetie Pie Thomas, a sweet, babyish little girl; Gloria Dump, an exotic, blind, recovering alcoholic who the kids in town call a witch; Otis, an ex-convict who runs the pet store; and even the devilish Dewberry boys and the mean landlord Mr. Alfred. Naomi had been a town of islands. People kept to themselves. But because of Winn Dixie, that begins to change.

The story ends with Opal and Gloria Dump throwing a party for their new friends. Because Gloria makes her invite them, even the Dewberry boys (whom she doesn’t think she likes) come. What’s clear at the party is that each person is a better, more whole person because of their newfound community. Their hearts are not so empty now. They are better together.

The last image of the story is this group singing the African American spiritual “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah (Since I Lay My Burden Down):

Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down

All my sickness will be over

⁸ Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn Dixie* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2000). Movie: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2005.

When I lay my burden down
All my sickness will be over
When I lay my burden down

All my troubles will be over
When I lay my burden down
All my troubles will be over
When I lay my burden down

Lord, I'm feeling so much better
Since I lay my burden down
Lord, I'm feeling so much better
Since I lay my burden down⁹

Community is a place we can lay our burdens down. *This* is a place we can lay our burdens down. This is the miracle of community.

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⁹ <http://www.namethahymn.com/hymn-lyrics-detective-forum/index.php?a=vtopic&t=76>.