

“Belonging”
 October 25, 2015
 Florence Caplow, minister
 Rob Benedetti, Worship Associate

Call to Worship **Florence Caplow**

Whoever you are, whatever burdens you carry, whether you have come here sorrowful or joyful, tired or rested, despairing or hopeful,

Whether you have come here out of love, conviction, a wish for community, seeking or curiosity,

All that you feel and all that you are is welcome here.

This morning we are, together, the heartbeat of this congregation.

Sermon **“Belonging”** **Florence Caplow**

I want to talk about belonging today, what it means to belong, how belonging challenges us and comforts us, how we resist belonging and long for belonging, and what it means, really means, to belong to a UU congregation. I offer these words particularly for those who became members of Two Rivers UU today, crossing the threshold, formally, into covenant and belonging. Thank you, Udelle and Pam, for making that leap, for believing in us.

Questions of belonging are fundamental to our being human. We are social animals, like wolves or ravens or elephants, and for much of our evolutionary time on this earth, to be within community was necessary to our survival; to be separate or shunned from community was a death sentence. We have always needed one another to survive.

Do you remember, let’s say, third grade? And how everyone was navigating what it meant to be part of a group, what it meant to be ostracized, what it meant to have friends? It wasn’t easy, at least what I remember. It was fraught, it was life and death. That’s how primal belonging is for us.

We forget, as adults, as comfortable first world people with our gadgets and our houses. We can live alone, we can use our resources and our money to protect us in the way that our clan or tribe would have once protected us. But even now, if we wake in the middle of the night with a fear, or a grief, our response is to look for or wish for another human who can hear us, comfort us, be present with us.

I am very independent, and have lived and traveled alone a lot in my life, but I remember being in Berkeley a couple of years ago, staying at the house of friends who were out of town, and there were a series of earthquakes in the middle of the night, at maybe 2 am. The first one woke me up out of a deep sleep. I was sleeping right under a large window, and a few minutes later there was another, stronger quake. I got of bed and went into the living room, huddling on the couch where there were fewer things to fall on me, and then there was another, and I was terrified. I didn't know what would happen next, if the next tremor would knock the house down, and I did a very strange thing. I called a friend, woke someone up, who lived far away and couldn't do a thing, but just hearing another human voice was a comfort as the earth and I trembled.

That, at it's most basic, is belonging.

And I think I can say, with some confidence, that even the most independent, introverted, perfectly happy to be alone hermit has some longing for connection and community. Maybe once a week is just fine for that person, but connection still matters. I've read a lot of the poetry of the old Chinese and Japanese hermits, and here's the funny thing – what do you think they often wrote poetry about? Friends visiting their little mountain huts! I love the poetry of Ryokan, a simple Japanese hermit monk beloved in Japan. Here's a poem as he waited for a friend to arrive.

I stand up and look
 sit down and look
 waiting for you
 who promised to visit
 so we could view maple leaves
 at my hut

So this is the longing side, how we long for connection. But there is another, scarier side of belonging, and this is why some of us resist it. Groups of human beings can be dangerous. We can turn on one another. We can be unspeakably cruel – remember the third grade bully and his or her friends? We can form cults and mobs and fascist organizations bent on stamping out all diversity and freedom of thought. Every human institution and organization is inherently imperfect.

I had a friend, when I was in my 20's, who went from one place to another looking for an enlightened community he could trust –Buddhists, anthroposophists, monasteries – and everywhere he went he found the same thing: human pettiness, desire for power, confusion even in the wisest leaders. He would leave, deeply disillusioned, and find another place, hoping maybe this one would finally live up to its ideals, only to be disillusioned again. Witnessing his search taught me something very important – we are imperfect. We form imperfect communities. Even – and I hate to tell you this – even nice, sweet UU congregations can get all tangled up and cause pain to those who are part of them. Ask any of the people here who have been part of congregations over decades, and they will tell you that this is true.

This is why so many people who are attracted to Unitarian Universalism are wary of joining a congregation, or joining anything. I would say that's almost a cultural characteristic of UUs, which might be why there are so few of us! UUs are generally pretty aware people. Many of us, as young people, with the piercing clarity of a young mind, saw religious hypocrisy and rejected it. But at some point in our lives we felt a call back, to something, to some place where people were asking and exploring the big questions, of what it means to live this life. We may not have even known why we felt this call. No one requires you to be here on Sunday morning, no one will tell you your soul is in danger if you don't show up. But here you are, wondering, listening, singing, and being in community with one another. And it turns out that, even imperfect as we are, there is great sweetness in belonging to a congregation.

I want to tell you about my way back. As many of you know, I was raised UU in a small Midwestern congregation, but my primary spiritual communities and practices as an adult have been Buddhist, and that's another story, one I promise I will tell you more about. Today I want to tell you about how I reconnected with Unitarian Universalism.

About eight years ago I was living in Flagstaff Arizona, and going through a rough time. I had a full scholarship for a PhD in Ecology, but I was having health problems so severe that I couldn't start the program. I was sad and in pain and confused. There were no well developed Buddhist communities in Flagstaff, and one day I walked by an old house ear downtown and saw the sign: Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation. I decided to go the next Sunday.

I walked in the door and was greeted by a woman in her 30;s, shorter than me and tough looking, crewcut hair, wearing a black cowboy shirt and a big belt buckle (I later discovered, when we became friends, that she rode a rather large motorcycle). And then I sat down in the back, feeling a little awkward. And as soon as the service started I started to cry. I don't even know why. But I was so moved. I think it was the sweetness in the room, the goodwill, the poetry the minister read, the gay couples getting up to announce that they had just gotten married in California after twenty years of being together, and everyone cheering and clapping. There was so much kindness.

And afterward, the woman who had greeted me, Bren, came up to me and we started to talk, and I told her that I was sick, too sick to start school, and she said, "You know, we have a caring committee to help people who are having a hard time." and I think I might have started to cry again. And I went back the next Sunday, and the next, and Bren invited me to a Cajun Thanksgiving at her house, and soon I was leading a gratitude circle in the church, and going to the little silent meditation group, and it had become my community, my island. Right then the seeds were planted for the path of ministry

I'd like to share the words of the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, about what it means when we become a member of a UU congregation: "Inscribing your name does not transform you into an instant or born-again Unitarian Universalist. Our religious way of life is not so much an arriving as a becoming--an ongoing process of thought and life experience. Joining for you may mean fresh steps along a familiar path. It may mean venturing in

uncharted territory. In either case, the initiative is yours. You do not sign on someone else's dotted line of spiritual development, and there is no fine print. Your signature is your affirming symbol of commitment to an open-minded, inclusive, reasoned, seasoned, compassionate and contemporary approach to life."

I think though there is another aspect to being part of a UU community, which is transformation. The first congregation I actually joined was First Unitarian in Oakland, in a big old stone church next to the freeway in downtown Oakland, founded in 1891. When you walk in the doors the first thing you see is a big banner that says Transformation Within, Transformation Among, Transformation Without. In other words, a dedication to personal transformation, transformation in how they are as a community, and transforming the world.

Maybe another one of the reasons some of us resist community is that we sense we may be called upon to transform, to grow beyond who we are into a wider way of being human. This can be deeply challenging to who we think we are and what we believe. Just ask the people in the UU congregations that are putting up Black Lives Matter banners, and struggling with what that means, and seeing them torn down and getting threats, and putting them back up again.

So what does it mean to belong to Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist? And all of us belong, even those of you who are determined never to sign that book, no matter what, even if you come every Sunday for years. To belong means that we take care of one another, as best we can. That's our covenant with each other, to take care of one another, to bring a spirit of care to those who come through our doors and to offer that caring to the world. Here at TRUU, like that congregation in Flagstaff, we have a caring committee, people who have made a commitment to reach out, send condolence and get well cards, make soup, visit people who are sick. I think the spirit of the caring committee is actually the heart of the congregation, I'd like to ask any members of TRUUs caring committee who are here this morning to stand up, so we can see who you are.

– but of course, it goes far beyond just the caring committee. This whole congregation is a caring committee, or a large Italian family, as you heard from Rob earlier. That's called shared ministry. The old meaning of the word minister is servant, one who serves.

You might have the idea that I am the minister and you are not, but that's actually not quite true. For a congregation to be a living community, we must minister to one another, and to the wider community. Each of us must be empowered to minister, just as Bren ministered to me, the day I walked in the door of the Flagstaff congregation. Then we create transformational community, however imperfect it may be. A congregation becomes a place that can change lives, as mine was changed that day, that can create ripples that can change the world. Really. That's what it means to belong.

Benediction**Florence Caplow**

Just as we light a flame held in a chalice to begin our time together, so may you feel your own heart's flame kindled and held in community, this morning and as you return to your life. May the light of the goodness in this room help to bring light to the world.