

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Belonging in Community”**

Rev. Sam Trumbore September 18, 2022

### **Call to Celebration**

I begin our service this morning with a reflection on belonging by Brene Brown. She got deeply tuned into this subject talking to middle school students. She was focused on the difference between fitting in and belonging, a common struggle for newly socially aware youth. She likes to quote one simple and insightful response she got from them: “Fitting in is when you want to be a part of something. Belonging is when others want you.”

Those youth knew they could twist themselves into a pretzel to fit in, but they couldn’t easily manipulate others to want to have them around, creating that belonging experience. The youth knew they had to learn how to be generous in a way that connected them to others and got their belonging needs met. No easy task for youth, no easy task for adults either.

As one who has been richly blessed with belonging experiences, I want to do whatever I can to help others experience have that sense of belonging here and remove the barriers that might interfere with it.

And I know this isn’t something I can do by myself. It is a collective endeavor to offer a wide welcome.

This morning, let us connect with the beautiful and fulfilling experience of belonging and make a deeper commitment to inclusion. May we open our hearts wide to each other as we build beloved community and join together in the celebration of life.

### **Reading**

This reading comes from a 2017 symposium on Revisiting Maslow: Human Needs in the 21st Century by Shirley Le Penne. It is titled:

Longing to Belong: Needing to be Needed in a World in Need

In modern societies, “communitiness,” or sensing belonging to a social group, is not exclusive anymore: people can opt to identify with any number of different communities, rather than one that they are born into. By choosing to join these communities, individuals fulfill their longing to belong, a basic human need according to [Abraham] Maslow. Yet, it appears that for Millennials, nominally joining a community does not automatically mean belonging to it. ...

Social belonging, according to Maslow, is inherent to the human condition and nature. The lack of it might lead to various undesirable effects, such as decreased health, unhappiness or maladjustment (Baumeister and Leary 1995). I hold that Millennials’ experience of belonging raises two key questions.

First, in an age where the community you are born into is often not the community you later adhere to, where groups are often virtual, and interpersonal relations mediated online, what does belonging mean? Second, is belonging experienced as a duty to be fulfilled?

Modern society has shaped the art of making people feel dispensable (Junger 2016). Millennials understand belonging to a community as an opportunity to reverse this tendency: pursuing a sense of belonging becomes a means of achieving a sense of being needed. It is not only about joining a community, but about developing a deep understanding of the community's needs in order to achieve them for its sake, out of care and empathy. Within communitness, the feeling of being needed creates a sense of indispensability, worthiness, self-respect and autonomy in individual's self-perception.

## Sermon

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been around for a long time now. He thought basic human needs had a hierarchical dimension. If you were hungry, cold and feeling threatened, it would be difficult to attend to higher needs such as status or self-esteem. Our physiological needs for air, water, food, shelter, sleep, and clothing are so important and basic that they would dominate our attention until they were met. Once those were met, our safety needs for personal security, income and good health would be our next priorities. Only after these are satisfied, can higher order needs for love and belonging, freedom and recognition, and finally, at the top of the pyramid, the need for self-actualization could be met.

Whether Maslow had that order correct or not for everyone is less important for my focus this morning than his stress on the importance of belonging that Shirley Le Penne highlights as quite important for Millennials ... and for everyone else ... too. The times we live in add additional stresses for all of us with the increased stimulation of social media and the impact of the pandemic which isn't done with us.

This summer, both UUA co-moderators got COVID and this week so did President Susan Frederick-Gray.

For these reasons and others, we're seeing sky-rocketing levels of loneliness especially in the generation that grew up online. Many may not be very familiar with the benefits of belonging that previous generations learned early in their childhood religious, social and civic associations that were much stronger than they are now.

I had the good fortune to grow up in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Newark, Delaware. I attended their religious education classes and Sunday services. I participated in social justice projects and social events. I helped with the construction of their RE building, taping sheet rock and painting walls.

At Newark High School, I got very involved in WNHS, the cable station that aired shows produced by the high school students with help by advisors. I had a show called Interface: Politics interviewing local and state politicians about current events. I interviewed Senator Joe Biden for the station and the Governor!

I got a wonderful experience of belonging in that studio as we learned how to run audio and record and edit one inch reel-to-reel video tape.

I was also part of the chess team in high school. We were a small group that had a strong sense of belonging to our team. I played the fifth board. Since all of us were strong players, I often was the one who got the easy win against a team without a lot of depth of talent. We bonded driving together to matches and studying openings together. Belonging can be stronger in small groups where everyone must do well. We were undefeated in our senior year!

What did that feel like to belong? One important experience of belonging was the satisfaction of making a positive contribution. Things often happened because I organized them to happen. I was an integral part of a team that worked well together. I got recognition for my work and my contribution to the success of the station in the form of personal and public praise. I was trusted with a key to the studio door! I was permitted to run expensive equipment. I felt like I was part of something bigger than myself.

I hadn't realized how much belonging I'd developed with Unitarian Universalism until I moved to California at the age of 20. During high school and college, I'd drifted away from attending the UU Fellowship in Newark because they didn't have much programming for youth and young adults. The terminus of my journey west, in 1977, was Palo Alto, California.

I lived in a residential hotel by the Caltrain tracks while searching for a job. I didn't know anyone. I had no social network at all – this was before the Internet and the Web of course.

My first Sunday there, I took the bus to the Palo Alto Unitarian Church. Sitting in the service, I quickly felt like I was where I belonged. I knew the hymns they were singing. The people felt familiar and friendly. They had a bookstore with books I recognized. Even though I was almost 3000 miles from home, I felt like this is where I belonged.

Knowing this wonderful feeling of belonging to UU congregations in Palo Alto and Oakland, California, Rochester, Williamsville, and Niagara Falls, New York and Port Charlotte, Florida, and at our yearly Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly gatherings and our Cluster gatherings, I'm strongly motivated to provide that experience for those exploring our congregation hoping Unitarian Universalism will offer them that sense of belonging.

The challenge in a Unitarian Universalist context is we experience belonging a little differently here than many other religious traditions.

Shaped by Catholic and Protestant Christian experiences or teachings, many are disoriented by our lack of a creed or required beliefs. A visitor here does not need to believe or not believe in God. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans, Humanists, atheists, Deists, are all welcome here. We have shared values rather than shared beliefs. Those shared values such as the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the affirmation of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part can be supported by many different beliefs.

We do not have a sacred text we follow that organizes how we do religion. Many different texts are available to us to help us develop our own philosophy of life and spirituality. And we can pick and chose, as we are not bound by the limitations of any one of them. Rather than narrow our search for truth and meaning to one source, we may find more truth and meaning consulting multiple sources. The Buddha really understood the nature of suffering. Jesus had powerful teachings on love and justice. Judaism can be a great guide developing moral and ethical principles. Sufism, the mystical interpretation

of Islam, and Bhakti Yoga, from Hinduism, have wonderful spiritual practices that open the heart. Each of us has different needs and priorities in our spiritual lives depending on our histories and life circumstances.

I hope your appreciating the width of diversity permitted and encouraged in our congregations. Unfortunately, that width can work against creating a sense of congregational unity of identity. If I do a prayer to Jesus from the pulpit, some who identify as Jewish might be uncomfortable. So might the atheists. If I do a sacrifice to the Hindu god Shiva, without a lot of explaining, people might wonder if they came to a UU congregation. And some would be just fine with something different and unusual.

The problem is the wider the diversity, the harder it is to cultivate that feeling of belonging. Theoretically, we have great width in what we can believe. In practice the tolerance is much narrower. Few in this congregation would welcome me defending Trump's belief that the election was stolen from him. Few would appreciate any defense of white supremacy or racial profiling by police. A sermon denying the threat of climate change would have me searching for a new pulpit rather quickly. Yes, I have freedom of the pulpit ... but you have the freedom to terminate my call to this congregation.

Without strong denominationally sanctioned beliefs and practices to create boundaries for who belongs and who doesn't, each congregation must set those limits. The tool our congregations are encouraged to employ to set limits are covenants. They do not define what we believe. They define *how* we will be together, the process of how we will develop an identity unique to our congregation that says who we are and how we will be in relationship with each other. Rather than a creedal test that defines who belongs and who doesn't, it sets the aspiration for how we will care for each other.

Here is the covenant our congregation worked hard to craft three years ago to address this need:

As a congregation with respect for our past and commitment to the future, we draw from the depth and power of our hearts and minds, guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles, to serve our mission and vision.

We celebrate the diversity of our identities and experiences, and foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness.

We honor both the strength of the collective and uniqueness of the individual, willing to support and challenge each other with love and compassion.

We entrust ourselves to each other in beloved community, to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation.

So rather than reacting with suspicion, fear, and a sense of threat to difference, our members are encouraged to foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration and kindness.

Balancing the strength of the collective and the individual - following a different drummer, we are encouraged to both support that individual and challenge them and each other with love and compassion.

Within the context of beloved community that is defined by a culture of appreciation, inspiration and kindness, a place where both support and challenge can happen through a process imbued with love and

compassion, our personal and congregational growth and transformation will be emboldened and unfold.

The firmer boundaries are set by institutional history, our vision and mission, and the principles of Unitarian Universalism. We will not tolerate authoritarian governance, dehumanizing rhetoric or actions, or efforts to exclude people with marginalized identities.

Still we are emotionally reactive creatures. Differences often make people feel uncomfortable. The Republican party of Texas has made it their mission to eliminate differences that might make their children feel uncomfortable. They seem to think their potentially non-binary children will strive to suppress it if they don't know this identity is a legitimate possibility for them. (In the age of the Internet and social media, good luck with that.) And I know good-hearted, progressive liberals who've struggled emotionally with their children identifying as transgender. Difference isn't easy.

One effective way forward is to build bridges between our divisions.

Olga and I will be working together to build musical bridges to help us work with difficult emotions that come up when we confront differences. I can yak all I want up here about building bridges but words put to music can melt the heart. Different musical forms and expressions can stretch us out of our comfort zone and into a new "culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness."

The service topics for Sunday morning, adult education classes, the programming for children and youth, all will have components that will "support and challenge each other with love and compassion."

One of the best ways to bridge our differences is by developing our personal relationships. Meaning Matters and Wellspring meet for a year and develop strong bonds between the participants that make room for our differences through our love and care for each other. At a lighter level, those relationships can develop on Sunday morning during coffee hour, singing together in the choir, serving on a committee or team or in leadership of our congregation.

The transition for visitors to new members, from outsiders to insiders, happens through that process of developing more and more relationships. The fast track to feeling a sense of belonging is developing friendships with at least six people in the congregation that feel affirming of who you are and fosters appreciation for who they are, even if there are significant differences.

In a time with the resurgence of White Christian Nationalism, this nation and this world, desperately need to learn how to embrace difference and realize that we need each other and belong together. This is a species level evolutionary change we are in the middle of figuring out how to navigate. Figuring out how to widen the experience of belonging across differences is very fruitful work, dare I say the saving work, this congregation and Unitarian Universalism has at the center of our faith development.

If that is something you care about too, you belong in this community.

All are welcome here.