

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
Beloved Community in Practice
Rev. Sam Trumbore February 21, 2021

Sermon

Embedded in the founding principles of this nation is the vision of Beloved Community. Unitarians and Universalists sensed it and gradually moved toward it. Today Unitarian Universalists recognize its value, are naming it, and actively seeking to realize it.

The Beloved Community, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought into our national discourse in the 1950's, envisions a wide diversity and inclusion. We Unitarian Universalists are identifying it as respect for and inclusion of diverse theological beliefs, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, economic status, political philosophy and cultural heritage. Rather than marking boundaries of "who is in" and "who is out" of beloved community, our goal is **striving to find the edge** of our inclusion and discern if that boundary is appropriate or not.

External markers, as much as possible, are not where those boundaries are drawn. What unites us is our shared heart, our care, our human centered values. Those values prioritize what happens in this life not what happens after death. We gather for our sacred work of lifting hearts, broadening minds and doing justice in the world in service of building beloved community.

This is the spirit of [the proposed 8th Principle](#) to add to our Purposes and Principles that reads:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

These are all lofty and beautiful ideas. Today we're going to talk about putting them into practice.

Now in some *other* denominations, the members would say *to me*, “You're the minister – *you* go do it.” That's *not* how things work in *our* congregation. We are a community that puts its faith in the collective wisdom of its individual members. No one of us has a red telephone or secure Internet link to God. I have some expertise and training others don't but this is a very smart, well-educated congregation here. Our faith says, we, as a congregation, can discern better than any individual. Not perfectly by any means, just better than one person. Much better than a charismatic religious leader vulnerable to the distorted thinking that comes with the intoxication of power and prestige.

Our collective wisdom is available to our congregation to guide it, *only* if there is wide participation. This is why I bring this message to you this morning rather than just t the Board or the Ministries and Operations Team. The realization of Beloved Community will require all of us to participate.

That was one reason I wanted you to hear about [Dr. Elinor Ostrom](#)'s Eight Core Design Principles for successful, high functioning groups. I spoke about them two weeks ago in [my sermon on the](#)

[evolution of community](#). These generalized principles helped effectively handle the tragedy of the commons problem.

Remember them? Here are her core design principles again:

1. Strong group identity and understanding of purpose that recognizes boundaries, rights and obligations of being a group member.
2. Proportional equivalence between benefits and costs. Those who put in extra work, get the rewards, assuming everyone does their fair share. Fairness is paramount.
3. Fair and inclusive decision making. Everyone takes part in decision-making striving for consensus, if possible, to establish agreed-upon behaviors and goals.
4. Monitoring agreed-upon behaviors. Everyone must be willing to be monitored and held accountable for lapses and transgressions.
5. Graduated sanctions. Holding people accountable begins soft and gradually becomes harder. Most just need a gentle nudge or reminder. The threat of harsher punishment needs to back that up.
6. Fast and fair conflict resolution. Resolution inside the group is far better than an appeal to outside authority.
7. Local Autonomy – The group needs to be able to create its own social organization and make its own decisions as outlined in 1-6.
8. [Polycentric Governance](#) – relationships between subgroups need to follow the same rules and procedures of the larger groups. The institutions, in which the group is embedded, also need to honor those rules and procedures. (Wilson - paraphrased)

So how are we doing, as a congregation, regarding these principles? In some ways, very well. In recent years we've focused more on our purpose, revising our mission statement and developing a vision statement. The mission is more identity centered and the vision is direction focused. I've found reflecting on and prioritizing lifting hearts, broadening minds and doing justice very helpful as we decide how to allocate our congregational resources and energy.

The last several years we've paid a lot of attention to changes in our governance structures that are polycentric and respect local autonomy. We are part of UU governance structures that honor local autonomy and polycentric structures that mirror ours, even how the UUA Board conducts its business. We have a fair and inclusive approach to decision making.

As I reflect on these design principles, the area I believe we need the most work is around the accountability measures like monitoring agreed upon behaviors, graduated sanctions and fast and fair conflict resolution. The problem with these three is ***our culture of conflict avoidance***.

We live stressful lives these days. And if we are fortunate to live low stress lives, we need only monitor the news for a short time before getting agitated. When people come to our virtual doors, they seek comfort and inspiration. They want to feel good about themselves. They want to make positive connections with others. They would prefer to be part of a community that leads them to

inner peace, safety and ease, words from the Buddhist loving kindness meditation we do each Sunday in our meditation group at 8:30am.

I get it. I want those experiences too! Yet in relationships between people there are going to be problems. It can't be avoided! Beautiful as it can be to participate in a vibrant, and thriving community such as what we have here, there are disagreements. People want different things and prioritize differently. Feelings get hurt. Harm happens. Needs go unfulfilled.

Community would be easy if we were all enlightened! If everyone would just let go of their personal desires and aversions. Our human propensity to prioritize self-interest and personal comfort over community wellbeing causes endless issues to resolve. We have no rules, for example, about hymn singing. I grew up enjoying the German beer drinking songs Martin Luther transformed into hymns. Others prefer syncopated Caribbean music, Gregorian chant, or Rap tunes. Hail to Randy Rosette, our interim music coordinator, for trying to find some agreeable balance. Congregations can fight endlessly about music.

Part of our challenge is our individualistic approach to religion. We don't require everyone to believe the same way. Our shared values can be supported by a variety of beliefs. Many people come to us because their minds rebelled against the creedal statements or beliefs or practices which they were required to accept. Unitarian Universalism honors each person's faithfulness to *their* perception of what is true. Here, we need not believe alike, to love alike. Our diverse beliefs *need not* undermine our commitment to this community.

This individualistic approach to belief hasn't helped us, though, become more diverse and inclusive. We were founded as a missionary church of upper crust, elite, Boston Unitarianism to the western frontier across the Hudson River in 1844. Our sanctuary was designed in Boston as part of an agreement to get the American Unitarian Association to buy the land it sits on and give it to us. White, intellectual, college educated, middle class culture has defined us from the start.

Of course, we have grown and changed over the years ... but we retain a great deal of that culture. The diversification beyond that culture and the inclusion of people bringing different cultures is likely to create more conflict. What I hear again and again from other UU congregations is increasing diversity and inclusion also increases conflict. Why? Unconscious bias that results in microaggressions. Cultural unfamiliarity that causes harm. Wider varieties of preferences and priorities that challenge existing practices.

Thus conflict is baked into *taking* our mission and vision seriously – but please also consider that conflict, *done well*, isn't a bad thing. In fact it is transformational.

Jan McCracken gave me [*The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*](#) by [John Paul Lederach](#) that I've been reading. Lederach recognizes that conflict is a *normal* part of human relationships. Not only is it normal, it is also the motor, the motivator, the engine that drives change. When something goes wrong and conflict results, skillful conflict resolution can *not only* bring resolution but change things *for the better*. Numerous times over the 31 years Philomena and I have been married, we've had conflicts we've resolved that have *not only* brought resolution but also brought us closer together.

Lederach defines conflict transformation as a **constructive change process** that responds to the natural ebb and flow of human relationships. The result of that constructive change process, when skillfully done, is the reduction of violence and an increase in just and fair resolutions. Skillful change processes involve direct interaction within helpful social structures and respond to real-life problems.

Critical to see here is that peaceful resolution of conflict is not a fixed end point. Peace is a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationship. What increases over time is a confidence, a trust and a capacity to engage in constructive change processes because resolutions **have been achieved**. Philomena and I are not done having conflicts, far from it. But we've developed a good record of resolutions that has developed a great deal of confidence and trust in each other to enter the next one and expect a good outcome. And we have a wide array of skills to draw upon to help us resolve the next one. And we've both grown and developed a lot over those years.

If we really want to be a diverse and inclusive congregation, we need to become more skillful and willing to deal with conflict. Thankfully it is a skill that **can be** developed. Social structures can be created to facilitate constructive change processes. And developing that skill can reduce our anxiety about conflict and help our congregation to do conflict well.

The good news is we have a lot of people in our congregation **who do know how** to do conflict well. What has been missing is intentional work to organize that energy into social structures people can use to share their skills and resources.

The even better news is the Conflict Transformation Workgroup is forming right now to do just that. Jan McCracken, Michael Hornsby, Paula Brewer, Sharon Babala, Anne Marie Haber, Brian Frank, Jean Poppei, Deborah Vogel and I are beginning to develop tools to facilitate constructive change processes. The workgroup hopes that these processes will increase trust and help strengthen relationships between our members and friends. They are considering how we might create new levels of community where the conflict that naturally occurs in the ebb and flow of congregational life, can be proactively mitigated. Their hope is their initiatives will result in outcomes that facilitate growth, development and greater love and care for each other.

So, if we really want to build Beloved Community, a community that is diverse and inclusive, we're going **to need** to get better at conflict. Thankfully, we've never been better prepared to do conflict well in a productive and caring way than we are today. The social sciences and the heritage of world religious teachings provide many ways for us to be successful.

May we accept this challenge, not just for ourselves as individuals, not just for the benefit our congregation but that we may be part of transforming how this community, this region, this nation and this world deals with conflict. It is time to put down our weapons, unclench our fists, stop shouting and threatening each other, and find other ways to make peace.

May we have the courage to face this challenge and discover the transforming power of unity in diversity **which is at the core** of our faith.