

Sustained by Community: Sugar Blues—An Unusual Path to Connection

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Unitarian Universalism saved my life. Yes, ours is a religion that saves! It helped me to find my voice, it gave me a safe space to grow, to heal, to change and most importantly it converted me from someone who was fearful of community and avoided it all costs into someone whose life has been transformed by community. Today I couldn't imagine my life without community. Not just the community of Unitarian Universalism, but other communities as well. Communities which also saved my life I must add.

You could say that I am a community convert.

Sustained by Community. The second statement of your mission statement and one that we have certainly lived into this morning. A beautiful child dedication for a family that models our commitment to diversity. Diversity in what family means and looks like.

The candles of joy and concern this morning. Community. Sustaining community.

And of course our blessing for Sue as she prepares to set off on her travels. I could feel the mutuality of that blessing. Yes, Sue is filled with the love of this community, and we too are filled with that same love as a result of that blessing.

Sustained by Community—meaning cared for in conditions that allow each of us as individuals and as a whole to thrive. Not just survive. For people can survive the most horrific conditions. And they do every day.

I believe that there is within all of us a flame, a desire for life that is strong. Immensely strong. It is what carries us through times that we may not believe we can. Times of loss, jobs, marriages, people through death and sickness; times of confusion and frustration when the way is not clear. Times of loneliness or when we feel that no one else has felt what we feel; be it despair, depression, or worry so heavy that we fear it will never lift.

That desire for life, that flame that allows us to survive is strong.

But there is a huge difference, a life changing, difference between surviving and thriving. And after years of living both ways I can attest that thriving is oh so much better than surviving. In order to thrive as I am describing it we need community and we need genuine connection with others.

In order for community to be something that transforms lives, that allows people to thrive, community needs to be more than a gathering of people. It needs to be a gathering of people; two or more some would say; where there is genuine and authentic connection. It needs to be a place where a person feels heard and understood down to their bones.

Rev Matt Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor of St. Pauls United Church of Christ in Chicago, describes this kind of connection using the concept of twinship. The concept of twinship was developed by psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut, the founder of what is known as self-psychology. Kohut, originally a Freudian analyst, developed this approach to therapy after World War II and the Holocaust. His concept of twinship in lay person terms is the ability to feel as though we belong.

The Rev. Fitzgerald writes about twinship. He says; "You can't come into your own unless you've had ...'twinship.' Everyone needs someone to look at and say.... Our brains crave this kind of connection. We cannot come into our own without it."

One of the hardest things though is that when people are surviving the last thing we want to do is reach out for community. It can in fact feel impossible.

That's where I was when I joined the Unitarian Society of Hartford. A single parent, babe in arms, I was desperate for community. I was also surviving, not thriving. I didn't have community, didn't know how to create it, and honestly it was in many ways the last thing that I wanted. But the pain of surviving became greater than my fear of community and I went. That congregation held me as I healed, grew and ultimately developed into the person that I am today.

It didn't meet all of my needs, it couldn't have. But it gave me experience with community in ways that allowed me years later to reach out for help. When I realized that I needed to stop drinking and joined AA, and years later, not so long ago as a matter of fact, when I realized that I also needed to put down sugar the same way that I put down red wine; I had the courage to walk into the doors of communities of people who understood me. Who "twinned" me if you will. Our congregation couldn't do that, but it did give me enough experience with community to have the courage I needed to go to other communities and be safe.

So I am both eternally grateful to Unitarian Universalism and I am also aware of the need for our congregations to help make those opportunities for deep, meaningful, authentic connections possible for people. I see this happening here at First Parish and it makes my heart sing. Those of you who meditate together weekly, or do yoga. The men who are in discernment about creating a men's spirituality group, parents supporting each other when their children are leaving home for college or elsewhere. I could go on. This is wonderful AND, and, there is room and I believe hunger for more of this.

Almost two years ago, I stood in front of another congregation and shared my personal experience with alcoholism including in my family. This included my own realization of where things could be headed if I didn't stop drinking. The incredible recovery that I found and how that eventually allowed me to follow my calling into ministry.

In the course of that sermon I made mention, one or two words, about the fact that I was also allergic to sugar. Out of that one comment, multiple women came to me individually and shared their stories. Their pain, the things that they thought no one else could possibly understand. I hooked them up with each other, they began meeting, and to this day meet every week to share their experience struggles and hope.

Anaïs Nin wrote; "All of my creation is an effort to weave a web of connection with the world; I am always weaving it because it was once broken." All of us are broken, every one of us; some

to more degrees than others. I've yet to meet a person who does not have a broken place in their lives. I think that sometimes we think that those are the places to hide and yet those are the areas where we often can make the most genuine connection.

We can find that connection in small groups. Places where we can meet those who know parts of ourselves intimately, or who share similar life circumstances or interests are how we know that we belong. Done well, that sense of connection is carried back into the larger community and the congregation is stronger because of it.

I hope that some of you share this belief and are as excited as I am about the possibility of doing more of this. This interim time period is the perfect time to be forming those kinds of deep bonds between you.

I will close with this; years ago a friend of mine asked me why I wanted to go into the ministry. I could tell that he was very serious when he asked and was not looking for a rote answer. He was a retired college President, deeply caring and very intelligent. "Tell me" he said. "Really, what is your call to ministry? Why are you doing this." A moment of silence. My answer surprised even me. I thought of the people whose bedsides I had sat by in hospitals, the mother who lost one of her twins at birth and wanted me to offer a prayer. The father whose 27-year old daughter had just committed suicide.

"Because no one need ever be alone," I answered him. "I want to go into ministry because I believe that no one need ever be alone."

All of our lives, we need connections, we need to know that we belong. Because no one ought ever be alone.

Amen and Blessed Be