

Last week, like many Unitarian Universalist congregations all over the country, we held our traditional in-gathering Water Ceremony. I'm always moved by the symbolism of many people, each of us, pouring water into a single bowl; many becoming one. E pluribus Unum. Out of many, one, or alternately one from many.

A number of you expressed appreciation for the fact that I asked that you pour your water in silence. Undoubtedly, you've lived through a water ceremony where people have gone into great detail about where their particular drops of water came from. And I suspect, you had the same reaction that I've had. Not only does it take a lot longer that way, it also tends to bring a focus to our differences, not our commonality.

Today I want to follow up on the meaning of our Water Ceremony and talk about our sameness, our similarities, our in-common-ness, housed in this facility, housed in our faith community, in our denomination. In part, I want to talk about what this faith community means to me, but more importantly, I want to shine a light on what a faith community can mean and can do for all of us.

By way of foretelling, I titled the sermon, a Helping Hand. A Faith community is not just any community. There is something special and different about a faith community, compared to other types of communities. What's different about a faith community is its foundation, its theological underpinnings if you will.

A faith community is grounded in a set of shared, core beliefs. A faith community exists around a set of core beliefs that are foundational in our lives, a set of beliefs that inform our worldview, help us make sense of the world and our place in it. And as we heard from Paul Rasor, a complete theology informs the way we behave, the way we live our lives.

This is not the case with most other communities. While we may reasonably expect to get a helping hand from our neighbors in the communities where we live, that is not the community's primary reason for existing. While we may have a shared set of beliefs in the communities where we work and play, those shared beliefs are not necessarily foundational to who we are and how we live our lives.

Each faith community has an identifiable set of core beliefs that all members buy into, to varying degrees. When I was first exposed to the beliefs and principles of Unitarian Universalism, it spoke to me immediately. They were beliefs that I had held for most of my life. It was a worldview that made sense to me. It was a philosophy that I myself had espoused. It represented a way of life that I believed in.

I was exposed to the beliefs of Unitarian Universalism in a church. But I didn't understand how it was a religion or a faith community. I didn't understand that it was a theological set of beliefs, not just philosophical, not just a particular orientation, not just something that was new-age-y that sounded good.

I didn't understand the significance of it being a faith community. I didn't understand the difference between a community of like minded people and a community of faith. I didn't understand the power of covenantal relationships across a broad array of very different people. But I was committed. I knew there was something powerful and important that I was being exposed to. So I went to seminary to learn more about it.

Now I don't mean to imply that one needs to go to seminary and adopt the life of an ordained minister in order to understand these things. But years of seminary allowed me the opportunity to wallow in these issues, to stew in them and to absorb them in a way that I could not have done otherwise. It allowed me to develop a theology that was not just about my head and heart, but my guts, hands and feet, as Rasor says.

We as Unitarian Universalist have an identifiable set of core beliefs that we espouse. They are contained in, among other things, our seven principles. They are printed on the back of your order of service every week. Check it out. The inherent worth and dignity of every person,...and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Here-in lies the basis of my original confusion and lack of understanding. UUs are not the only people who believe in these things. We, in this room, in this denomination are not the only ones who adhere to some or all of these beliefs. I did not start believing these philosophical beliefs when I became a Unitarian Universalist. I had held them for most of my life.

Any number of people we know and don't know would ascribe to the set of beliefs contained in our seven principles. We might think of them as the well-informed, good people in the world. But the fact that certain people might hold these beliefs, does not in itself, make them Unitarian Universalists.

What sets us apart, what makes us Unitarian Universalists, what makes ours a theology, a denomination is that we "covenant to affirm and promote" these principals. We intentionally have chosen to come together, to be in a covenantal relationship with others, to join together, to promote and affirm our beliefs. Our intentionality, to come together, to be in an mutually accountable relationship with one another is what sets us apart and makes us a faith community.

We not only covenant to be in right relationship with one another in our own group here in Poughkeepsie but with all other Unitarian Universalists wherever they may be found. Our willingness to covenant with each other is what makes our beliefs foundational, a fundamental foundation on which to build and live our lives.

The reason we make distinctions between members, friends, visitors and all others is not merely bureaucratic. It is not only about who gets to vote for our leadership and bylaws. It represents a distinction in degrees of commitment, degrees of responsibility we hold for and with one another. While I don't want to take the analogy too far, it's the difference between a committed relationship and a relationship of close association.

In our faith community, it is expected that we will offer a helping hand to one another. It is expected that we will demonstrate care and concern for each other. We share our joys and concerns with people we know care about us and our well being; not necessarily because we are loved for who we are as individual personalities, but because we are all part of a shared community.

In more theological terms, as a result of our shared commitment to affirm and promote our beliefs, and our shared commitment to each other, we minister one to the other. Our faith community is a place where we get to practice and live out our beliefs with like-minded people, committed to the same things to which we have committed.

We minister to each other when we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of the other. We minister through our acceptance of one another and through our encouragement to spiritual growth of those in our community. We minister to each other as we support each other in our search for truth and meaning.

Offering a helping hand, being a helping hand is what a faith community is all about. A faith community is about caring for one another, its about ministering to each other and our community. And there are so many ways that we can share who we are and what we uniquely bring to the world.

Please take special note of the words that I'm using. They are all action words. Helping, sharing, encouraging, being, giving of one's self. These are all ways that we minister to each other. Our faith community can exist only with the active participation of those in our community. Coming out to take part, is a necessary first step in being in community. But active participation is what makes a community thrive. And active participation can take many, many forms.

There is a newly formed effort of being an Ambassador, where individuals proactively seek to welcome new comers and visitors. Mowing the lawn, weeding and planting are proactive efforts to be taken. Visiting those who are ill, serving as an usher or helping with coffee hour are ways that we minister to our community. Serving on committees, teaching children in our education program and singing in the choir can all be a form of ministry.

I first discovered my ministry while serving on a taskforce charged with designing and implementing a small group ministry program. I had worked with small group process for most of my professional career. I thought I had something to offer. To my great surprise, it was I who was given the gift of a lifetime.

The design team was talking about the meaning of the word ministry in small group ministry. During that conversation with our minister and several others, I realized that I had been ministering for much of my life in one form or another. On that day, a path that I had been walking for most of my life gained new meaning, became recognizable and I came to know myself in a completely new light.

I'm a great fan of small group ministry. In a very real sense, it provides an opportunity for us to minister to each other in a very meaningful way. A well run small group ministry program is an extremely efficient way for a congregation to live out and live into the principles we espouse. One simply commits to be faithful to a small number of people, to be present, to listen and to share one's self with the group.

By simply sharing one's thoughts, feelings and reactions to a particular subject, one has the opportunity to search for your own truth and meaning. By simply listening to another's story with compassion and attentiveness, we affirm their worth and dignity. By listening and sharing with each other in a safe and accepting environment, we come to discover that we are more than our personalities. We come to discover just how much we have in common with people who may appear on the surface to be very different from ourselves.

A small group ministry program is the most efficient way I know to build genuine and intimate relationships across a congregation. People who might be unlikely to spend time with each other have an opportunity to develop trusting and meaningful relationships. Over time, as the group composition changes with each program year, trust, compassion and a level of intimacy get woven into the fabric of the community. And we gain an enhanced understanding of this interdependent web of existence.

You'll hear more about the small group ministry program over the next several weeks. In the interim, I sincerely hope that you'll give concentrated thought to what this faith community means to you; what ministry would feed you. I encourage you to find something that you can sink your teeth into. Find some way you can feed your own wants and needs and simultaneously help to build a more thriving community for us all and for those who have yet to find us.

And May it be so.