

Much of what we do is out of habit, almost as if we're on automatic pilot. We go to work, clean house, buy groceries, with little attention paid to these everyday, often mundane tasks. So much of our lives go unnoticed.

I wonder if most of what goes unnoticed is not because there is nothing there, but because we fail to see it. We all have beliefs about how the government should operate, about what's ok and not ok to say to a stranger. I suspect what's beneath these beliefs and much of our behavior, is a complex set of connections to our history and our culture.

I suspect, and there are studies to support the idea, that much of what we believe and how we behave is learned. We are not just a bunch of unique personalities standing on the face of the earth. Our environment, our experiences teach us a great deal. We are all socialized.

We are socialized on a national level in a way that makes us Americans. We are socialized by our geography in such a way that makes us a mid-westerner, or a Bostonian or a New Yorker. And we are socialized by our particular families in a way that impacts our values and how we see ourselves. This socialization connects us to something outside ourselves, something, at least initially, that is not us; and yet, something that becomes internalized somehow and made a part of who we are.

I suspect, for the most part, we have little awareness of that which was once external, but has now become a part of our own sense of self. Even if we move away from the mid-west or Boston, there is something about that place that we take with us. Maybe it's a way of pronouncing words, or certain attitudes or the way we drive.

I think of these as examples of connections to our past, to prior experiences. Whether we hold them in esteem or not, they impact us. I'm sure, like me, there are things your parents did that you promised yourself you'd never do or say. I've got a pretty low batting average, what about you?

I think we learn many of our beliefs and attitudes from those around us and the norms that we learned to live with, and live by. I call these connections, tethers, bonds. You can hear them in peoples accents, you can see them in the way some people talk with their hands. And as a result of some of our religious communities, some of us are very good at doing guilt.

These connections, these tethers or bonds, are not easy to shake. These connections can be long lived, even with great distance between the points of connection. Many organizations and institutions count on the longevity of these connections. This is the stuff of brand loyalty. This is why every college and university has alumni associations that keep the post office in business with repeated pleas for donations.

Not all of our connections are imposed on us. Many are chosen. We choose to go to our institutions of higher learning, we choose to go to work for this or another organization. We

often develop a very real connection with these places. We root for our alma mater's basketball team, we put stickers on our cars, we wear the name on our sweatshirts. We show our connection with these places that we've come to value.

While we choose some of our connections, sometimes, they just seem to happen. Personal relationships can be like that. A friendship, a lover, a spouse, can simply be discovered. At some point you notice, this is someone I count as a friend, or this is someone I'd like to share my life with.

One day, not long after school began, this guy appeared in my seventh grade classroom. Before I knew it, we were friends. We started hanging out together. I played at his house, and he came to mine. As we got older, we played basketball together, shot pool, played poker and chased girls together.

We went to different colleges, he was on the west coast and I stayed in the east. Our lives went in different directions. We were largely out of touch. Some ten years later, we found ourselves living in the same community. He had become a republican, I remained true to my values. We argued about political issues and gave each other grief, but that connection remained. Our kids are up and out now, he's grown old, but our connection, that bond of friendship, pushing fifty years now, still remains.

Those early years have had an impact on my life. Those experiences have become a part of who I am. Like a tangled ball of string, I can't easily identify the specific connections, but they are there. When a long time goes by and I haven't been in touch, I notice it and feel guilty and chastise myself. That connection speaks.

These connections, these bonds, are often not visible. You wouldn't know about my friend unless I told you. And yet, they seem to be a part of that motor that drives us. They become part of our value system that guides our decisions.

We make a mistake I think, when we see ourselves only as a unique personality; as a person of our own making. Not only does that view of ourselves belittle all those events in our lives, all those people who have helped to shape us, it walls us off from some important connections. And when we are walled off from important connections, it can make our lives feel smaller. It can make us feel smaller.

That's a good reason to pay attention to our connections. They can enliven us, they can make our personal worlds larger, brighter. These connections can feed us. These connections, these bonds between people, can allow us to experience things that we could not experience alone. These bonds allow us to be a part of something, to achieve something that we could not accomplish on our own.

That's particularly true of a church community, a faith community. These communities allow us to experience achievements, accomplishments that we could not do alone. But that's

not why most people join our churches. Most people join our churches in search of a community. That's why I started going to a UU church. I was looking for a faith community.

And years later, here I stand! Beware of what you ask for, you may get more than you anticipate. I went to a church looking for something for me. What that something was, I don't think I really knew. Maybe I was looking for a sense of belonging. Maybe I was looking for a group that I could feel comfortable with, people who had a similar outlook on life.

I found that. I found a group of people who shared many of my values. But it wasn't until I became more involved with these people that I realized I had found a lot more than just people who shared my values. It wasn't until I became involved in more than Sunday morning services that I began to feel like I was a part of something bigger. I began to experience the connections.

At some point I became aware there was something going on beyond developing new acquaintances. I began to see that the connections I was making was with more than just certain individuals I liked and who liked me. I started feeling a connection to the place, to that church community. At that point it wasn't just about me getting warm and fuzzes as I soaked in what they had to offer me.

My willingness to engage that community allowed that place to pull something out of me. When we engage, we put ourselves in a position to be affected by outside forces. It creates the possibility that we might be changed. It creates the possibility that we might be transformed.

The bonds we create can have a powerful impact on us. Our bonds can act like glue, holding us in community. In many instances, the point at which an item is glued is stronger than the original material. These bonds can make us stronger.

We can bond with individuals and we can bond with institutions. There are members of this congregation that have moved away, been gone for years, and still make financial contributions to us. These people continue to feel a bond with this place. They have taken a part of us with them. Wherever they are, they are still connected with this place.

That type of bond is not just a bond with individuals. That type of bond is not a bond based simply on similar beliefs. Its not even a bond based on faith. That type of bond is a bonding with a particular community; a particular community that can not be replicated anywhere else.

This particular community is based on a shared set of beliefs. This community is based on a particular history that has led us to be who we are. This particular community has a particular way of being. And this community has a particular role to play in the universe; a role that no other community can fulfill.

And today, we have new members, who will help to build on our shared history. With new members we, collectively, become something we haven't been before. With new members, we will develop a slightly different chemistry; we'll become a slightly different community than we have been.

Let us not try to hang on to what we have been. For in the end, that's a fool's game. Nothing stays the same. Let us not ignore that everything is always changing, whether or not we want it to. Whether or not we can see it. Even the mountains we see in the distance are changing. And yet, that mountain remains what it is. It will not become a turnip.

Let us embrace our new members. And let us remember to embrace who we are and who we are becoming. It is the "bond between" that will hold us together, the bond with our history, the bond with our faith and beliefs. And if that bond is strong, we will be more solid than we were before.

With a strong bond, a strong bond between individuals, a strong bond with our values and principles, a strong bond to this place, we can be a force in this world of ours. We can be and do whatever we set our minds to, provided, we are engaged and committed. Its being engaged that creates the commitment, and its commitment that creates the bond. And it is the bond between that creates the leverage that enhances who we are and what we can achieve, together.

Don't let these bonds go unnoticed. Pay attention, notice them, and nurture them, because these bonds can make you stronger.

May it be so,

Amen