

The Task of Community
by Rev. Michelle Collins
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“If we agree in love, no disagreement can do us any harm. If we do not agree in love, no other agreement can do us any good.”¹

These words were spoken by Hosea Ballou, a leader in the Universalist denomination during the first half of the 19th century. His picture of a truly loving God led him to a more extreme version of Universalism which in turn influenced the overall movement.

Love is a word often used in our Unitarian Universalist religious communities. It’s used for what we do, for who we are, for how we are with one another. We name love in our own affirmation in every one of our worship services at First Unitarian – the words that we say bind us together as a religious community. “We affirm that love is our greatest purpose.” And as we just sang, love motivates us to action and connection with others in the world. So in an ideal world, a grounding of love both forms and moves our communities. Ballou’s words start us here, with this ideal of grounding our community with love.

Our communities form around something, and as Unitarian Universalists that something is not a creed or central set of beliefs but rather a covenant, the promises that we make about how we will be together. Many a paper has been written and a sermon has been preached on precisely this – in fact, it was the common theme for the past two UU General Assemblies, including the one just a couple of weeks ago in Louisville, Kentucky that I attended along with Rev. Josh, four other church members, and a number of other members who attended remotely.

My question today isn’t about covenant. I want to look at what comes after that in communities. Now that we’ve said, yes, we’re a community and here’s our statement for what binds us, and our grounding in love and so on and so forth. But then, what. My question for today is how do we DO community. What is the work that it takes to keep making a community; what does it take to truly bind us together?

It definitely takes more than just defining a group and having people join it to turn it into a full-fledged dynamic community. In fact, the group can do a lot of other things too, and still not really be a community. When my daughter was in kindergarten and

¹ Hosea Ballou, quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #705

first grade in San Francisco, I decided to give membership in the school's PTA a try. They met in the evening once a month, and since my daughter's after-school care was on the grounds of the school, it was convenient enough to get to the meetings. And the folks I talked to in the PTA seemed nice also.

I attended their meetings in the school library when I could. I paid my dues and voted in the meetings. I pitched in with cookies for bake sales and for teacher appreciation week. When the sandboxes in the kindergarten play yard needed refreshing, I spent a grueling but fruitful day alongside other parents shoveling sand – first the old out and then new sand in. It took more sand than you might think. All of this, but I never felt like I had found a community there.

What was missing? I think it was deeper than just more time together, although I did miss out on some of the social events but I made it to plenty of others. I can't say that any one program or event would have been a solution to have made it more a community.

To be fair, I don't think their goal was to be a community. They were a group that did things, things for the school and students, things to help the parents and teachers communicate as groups, and advocacy for the school. They were a group that did things, but not really a community. From our story earlier, the neighborhood where Jo and Gladys lived didn't seem to have this sense of community either, although Jo found herself yearning for it. Being a community rather than just a group takes a lot more work.

Probably nowhere is this work more apparent than in an intentional community where a group of folks live together in community with one another. A number of years ago, I spent a summer as a long-term volunteer living in an intentional community with other American volunteers in Managua, Nicaragua. They had been there about a decade, and it was a strong community that ranged from about six adults to ten, depending on how many long-term volunteers they had staying with them.

They had developed a significant sense of identity as a community, I think in large part from a number of ongoing struggles or efforts they had. They were entirely donation and grant supported, so whether they would have enough each month lay in perpetual uncertainty and we were always talking about fundraising. There was uncertainty about whether they would be able to continue in the property where they lived – the political situation in Nicaragua at the time resulted in a freeze on property transfers for a

number of years, so no one was legally allowed to transfer property ownership and therefore they couldn't purchase their property. During the summer I was there, I recall a particularly tense day when they finalized an unofficial sale for the house – they paid the owners of the next-door dairy farm a substantial sum of money in cash in exchange for a verbal agreement that the property was now theirs. You could feel the tension throughout the room during this transfer, and it lingered afterwards. Many challenges were ongoing.

I think my favorite part of the community was our time spent together, often over a meal since we ate dinner together as a community every day. We would push all of the tables in the front rooms together and gather any available chairs from throughout the house. Inevitably, someone (often me) would eat while swinging in the hammock at the side of the room. Part of the group would have prepared the meal and part would be assigned clean-up that day. And sitting around our collection of mismatched tables and chairs, heaped with varying combinations of mostly American but sometimes Nicaraguan food, there would be laughter, stories, political debates, philosophical discussion, and just about anything else. This is one of the places where community happened. Community happened at dinner, and also before and after dinner. Since I was a non-regular member of the community, I didn't quite get my pick as to jobs, so mine ended up being a whole lot of time on meal clean-up with a hearty portion of fly patrol since we had an extraordinarily high number of flies that found their way past our screened windows. It felt like a community that worked as community. We shared time and space together, we worked together, we problem-solved together, and we held the uncertainties that we couldn't solve together, too. Contact and cooperation are some of the work that builds community.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch has a few things to say about community. Her book *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* inspired a number of my thoughts for this summer, so you'll be hearing a good bit from it. She starts with the principle that "human solidarity is not our birthright, not a gift, not an essence, but [rather] a task," and she goes further and names some of the tasks that communities require. "The first step [according to Welch] is to recognize that social cohesion is created by contact, by working with other people, and does not require uniformity or total agreement."² Social cohesion starts and grows with contact and cooperation. The intentional community where I lived in Nicaragua has this as part of

² Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*, 117.

their regular practices, both with time spent together as a group and also the many shared tasks within the community. And by the way, they're still going strong.³

There are cultures where cohesion happens despite many other kinds of differences. Traditional Javanese villages have a considerable amount of diversity, including quite divergent religious beliefs, but still they have a lot of cohesion. Those who have studied their social structures hold up their traditional common meal, called a *slametan*, as one of the rituals that helps to grow this cohesion. Inuit social practices rely heavily on cooperation, even beyond biological ties! In their language structure, they often do not even acknowledge biological relatives if it is someone they have no interaction with.⁴ Cooperation and being able to rely on one another are key parts of the Inuit social structure. While these are more pronounced during times of food and resource scarcity, they are also present during periods of more abundance.⁵ Contact and cooperation are one of the things that make community.

As a community, we have time that we spend interact all together – our weekly worship services, events like our church auction this past spring, and at congregational meetings. And then there are the many small groups that we have here, and the interactions and cooperation that happen in those groups. These are where we intentionally spend time together. But as we know, it's not always smooth sailing.

Where there is diversity and difference, where stakes are high, where we care about being here and care about the outcome, there is often disagreement and conflict. Churches, including our own, are certainly no strangers to this. But while they are certainly no fun, ultimately these don't have to damage the community, and I think I'll agree with Sharon Welch that it's possible that getting through conflicts can actually help to grow and deepen a community. Welch says that "building [community] requires learning how to live through conflict, learning how to elicit and learn from critique and disagreement. Rather than seeing serious disagreement as a sign of failure, it is possible to take disagreement as an invitation to a deeper relationship."⁶

Conflict and disagreement can be an invitation to deeper relationship. In any system or community, there is always some level of tension or conflict present. There is no "zero"

³ <http://jhc-cdca.org/>

⁴ Welch, 69, citing work of Joseph Maxwell and Clifford Geertz.

⁵ Collings, Wenzel, and Condon, "Modern Food Sharing Networks and Community Integration in the Central Canadian Arctic."

⁶ Welch, 84.

on the conflict scale for communities. But rather than representing failures of the community to be a community, they can be opportunities for cooperation and opportunities to test out our covenants and our ideals about how we relate to one another.

I saw a journey through conflict to greater relationships happen on a season of a television show that recently I like to watch with my daughter. Now y'all are welcome to laugh – she and I like to watch *America's Next Top Model*, the reality competition show where beginning models go through a number of different photo challenges, with one model getting eliminated with each new episode until one winner remains. While there is usually some level of drama and tension involved, in the next to last season that aired, it was designed into the show. Half of the competitors were American, and half were British; they were sorted into those two teams in their house, and every judging panel and many of the challenges pitted one against the other. Trashing talking and pranks and insults ran quite heavily for the first half of the season. But then, I realized that a shift had happened. Throughout all of the conflicts between the women, through the increasing pressure of the competition, they had gotten to know one another and their differences didn't seem to be dividing them any longer. I saw friendships and less tension towards the end of that particular season than in other seasons of the show.

Working through the conflict, they got to know each other more deeply, and their community grew. Not only is the work of communities social cohesion through contact and cooperation, but there is another step also. Not only do we realize that the love is there, but we also move towards one another in relationships with respect and reciprocity.⁷ While working our way through disagreement and conflict, we have to stay in relationship with one another. None of this is easy work to do! Each of us as members of the community owns these tasks – of showing up and being there, of being willing to stay in relationship, and of taking risks to grow our relationships while respecting the perspectives and stories of others. The word “community” isn't a noun, it's a verb that we do. Community is a task and a responsibility owned by each person who is a part of it. It takes effort, work that I hope we keep embracing every single day. May it be so. Blessed be.

⁷ Welch, 117.