

“Gather in Spirit, Harvest the Power: Ingathering Sunday”

Rev. Dr. Larry Peers
First Unitarian Church of Wilmington
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When I was in college—just to be clear, we are not talking Old Testament times. It was in the late '70s, yes, the late 19--70s! I majored in Psychology. I took all the required courses: developmental psychology, statistics, personality theories, and psychometrics. In one course, Experimental Psychology, I had a choice: I could work with rats or with people.

I am squeamish about rats—but that’s not the only reason I chose to focus on people. I prefer it that way.

I also noticed that I had several classmates in the psychology program who were squeamish about people—and they choose to work with rats ☺

As time went on and I entered my work in the world as a psychotherapist, organizational consultant, professor, and minister---I decided that there are probably some good reasons to be squeamish about people. (I’m teasing).

I mean, in those roles you don’t always see people at their best AND...

AND—sometimes it is in those roles in particular that you discover the best things about people-and how remarkable and resilient, how generous and gracious people can actually be.

I don’t have to go too far for examples of this.

For example, this very moment happens through the combined efforts to create a Sunday morning experience—like this Ingathering Sunday. We are gathering for worship in the sanctuary and through Livestream. We are offering religious education outdoors. Some of us will gather for the multiple generation event of dedicating our

outdoor sanctuary and planting native plants after today's service. And, these are just Sunday's events—there are small groups and pastoral care, and preparing the kitchen remodeling---someone even gave her time this past week to find and shop for the ropes that mark off our social distancing. Some people gathered the tools and trees for today, someone gathered to sing---and record.

We can gather in this sanctuary this morning—with all of our necessary requirements for the gathering because we are willing to do what we need to do for the safety of all.

I could go on and on—but I am so very clear—that this STUUF—doesn't just happen—it comes from a place of graciousness and commitment to the Greater Good.

There is a dedication to something larger that propels and coordinates all of these actions that compose our gathering experience.

It is that Something Larger that I want to focus on this morning—

Gathering together across all our diverse experiences and expectations—is a radical act in an increasingly consumer-oriented, on-demand world.

Gathering together online or in the building—after we've been "cocooning" for months during this pandemic--- is a generous act.

Whether we are online or in the sanctuary it is a radical act to gather. It displays a generosity of spirit and an openness to the spirit that very few places in our culture require.

We all know that Unitarian Universalists are not persnickety. Right?

We all realize that the very hymn that you don't like may be someone else's favorite. The theological words that cause some of us to scratch are soothing to someone else. Some of us are here for comfort and others of us want to be motivated to change the world, or to

feel the power of belonging to a community like this---or some combination of all of these.

Yet, we gather together anyway—even after many of us have had months of on-demand experiences—at our fingertips or our smartphones.

It is hard to break the spell that the on-demand world has upon us--

Priya Parker in her book, *The Art of Gathering: How to Meet and Why it Matters* that:

[The] moments when we could benefit from gathering---we don't think to gather or are too busy to, or in a modern way, we don't want to ask people for their time...."

Parker even makes the point that there are a growing number of people who say that they don't want a funeral or memorial service when they die---as if the gathering is for them—

Over these last several months of the pandemic we've recognized that we can't just take gathering together for granted—and, sadly, some who wanted a funeral or memorial service could not have one—or have one in the same way.

Parker's life work is about constantly gathering activists, elected officials, community groups, and educators together. She has worked around the world and in peace processes in the Arab world, India, and southern Africa.

She recognizes that all of our ways of gathering have had to go through a makeover—on Zoom or socially distanced, or smaller groups—but she recognizes that we will continue to gather, because, there is something deeply human, across all cultures about gathering: Priya Parker writes:

Why do we gather?

We gather to solve problems we can't solve on our own.

We gather to celebrate, to mourn, to mark transitions.

We gather to make decisions.

We gather because we need one another.

We gather to show strength.

We gather to show honor and acknowledge.

We gather to welcome and we gather to say goodbye.

I believe that the operative word in her statements is “We”—not “I.”

The main point that Parker makes is that oftentimes with all of our reasons for a gathering we miss the “first step in convening people meaningfully—which she says is: “committing to a bold sharp purpose.”

We have spent so much energy figuring out HOW it is and the various ways that we can gather during this pandemic—that I think we need to focus also on why we gather.

Some of that Why is grounded in our religious tradition and also our theology as Unitarian Universalists. When I thought about it—I realized that our gathering—is more radical than I thought.

As I've thought about I realized that we should have a caution sign posted at the doors. I think we should have an opening slide for all of our online gatherings that could say:

Proceed with Caution, People Present, Transformation Possible.

I mean, if we are really doing what we say we want to do, then we need to be prepared to not always leave the same way we went in—to not expect that our gathering experiences together will be one “ditto” sign after another.

If we are really true to what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist—we have to engage in the disciplines and the expectation that we come together for a purpose—and in subtle or remarkable ways---when we are among people-virtually or in person, transformation is possible.

To say the word “transformation” in this context might seem trite—unless we truly understand that our religious forbears—fought hard for the possibility of human transformation in ways that we can easily take for granted.

They rebelled against a prevalent theological idea of their time: that our fate is all decided, we are pre-destined—that is all up to God to decide, and we must accept our fate.

Our religious forbears—fought hard against some fixed idea of who human beings are—such as Jonathan Edward’s proclamation that we are all “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

Instead our Unitarian and Universalists spiritual ancestors, our spiritual relatives—broke out of the molds that attempted to limit the capacities and the agency of the human being. Instead, we proclaimed that we can “bring about our own salvation”—That we can and we must cultivate our own character—They had perspectives and practices which the early Unitarians called “self-culture”—what we might today call “personal growth

". But it was much more than that--our religious ancestors also challenged and changed the social conditions that limited human potential for those marginalized and oppressed by our humanly constructed social structures.

We have inherited a faith tradition that points out to us that we should be about the ongoing transformation of consciousness and of the conditions that oppress and limit the possibilities to others.

The more contemporary Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies renowned for helping through his radio broadcasts to ignite many new Unitarian congregations around what is today's Washington Beltway put it more succinctly when he said:

“Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”

He went on to affirm that:

Religion is not something separate and apart from ordinary life. It is life - life of every kind viewed from the standpoint of meaning and purpose: life lived in the fuller awareness of its human quality and spiritual significance.

On a day, he must have a scuffle with someone he wrote:

You cannot have a good character today and at the same time have a small mind and a little heart. You cannot have a good character today and be merely a petty reformer.

I resonate so much with the spirit of our spiritual ancestors who---remind me, remind us—that we are not gathering as Unitarian Universalists to just conform, but to transform (there's that word again). That we don't commit to just conforming to society, but to reforming it along the lines of some broader principles.

I have been propelled in life by that same spirit beyond the struggles of when my Catholic parents divorced when I was nine, beyond the death of my mother when I was 16, beyond the erosion of a Catholic faith that was not only my inherited religion—but also a critical part of my Italian and Irish identity—beyond the challenges of growing up at a time when my sexual identity was considered sinister, sinful and sick---

I was propelled by the alchemy of our liberal religious faith—to participate in my "becoming" rather than to accept the theological and social narratives that limited the horizon before me.

So—folks, it is the same for many of us—

We gather not to conform but to transform. We gather not for conforming to what is, but to reform in the direction of what could be.

Shouldn't this "Proceed with caution" message be on our lighted sign on 202—if we are to be true to our religious heritage.

This is not an add water and stir religion.

At our best, "We Gather the Spirit."—at our best, we also "Harvest the Power".

Annie Dillard—recognized how casual we tend to be about what could happen when we gather as congregations. She writes;

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. "

The Unitarian theologian and philosopher, Henry Nelson Weiman, whose work was a focus in Martin Luther King's doctoral dissertation speak to us of power—a kind of relational power that I think is so critical as we gather together again—and emerge from the spell of our on-demand—way of being—for so many months.

Weiman speaks of a power that can work within us and among us when we gather.

Weiman asserts that: "The human is made for creative transformation as a bird is made for flight,"

He came to call the power that makes transformation possible "creative interchange."

“The Creative Interchange is experience, the kind of experience that transforms us in ways in which we cannot transform ourselves. As we meet in shared experiences, we become more fully human in ways in which we can never predict or bring about by striving to do so.”

Yet this doesn't just happen, because we are in the same room or on the same screen.

The qualities and disciplines of our gathering—are what matter.

What are those conditions--?

The first is Authentic Interacting--an openness and a willingness to share our individual perspectives and insights.

The second is Appreciative Understanding refers to how we relate to others. As we listen to others, we strive to do more than listen to respond. Instead, we seek to understand so that we can become aware of how even differing perspectives might have some mutual worth.

The third condition of Creative Interchange, Creative Integrating can often emerge from the first two phases. This is when a new perspective can arise through a creative synergy of perspectives. Sometimes a creative solution can emerge based on the best thinking that has been shared.

This power of Creative Interchange can often demonstrate to us—when we are available to it, that gathering together across our differing experiences and perspectives is a radical idea in a culture that tends toward polarization. And, it can often lead to transformation (there's that word again!)

In conclusion, I want to propose two contrasting images of what it means to gather together in a religious community.

You know those metal carousels with metal clips that in restaurants are often used to clip everyone's order slip to help servers and cooks track various orders. Imagine that carousel spinning around so fast and all you see is the variety of orders that are coming in at once. Most often people are only concerned that you get their order right!

One understanding of gathering together in Unitarian Universalist congregations can seem similar to that carousel. Some will say, "I like the sermons to include these ingredients." Or, "Worship must include this." Or, "I have an allergy to these words." Or, "I like my theology over easy." Or, "I want an extra helping of social justice."

Or, "I want a side order of spirituality, not an entree--only a side order."

Being in a religious community with diverse perspectives does not mean that we try to mimic the "on-demand" world that we've become so accustomed to experiencing during this pandemic.

Another image is that of a mobile.

As you know, a mobile--is "a hanging work of art in which component pieces seem to be free-floating in space though the wires and braces keep them interconnected and interrelated. Changing or removing just one part of the mobile causes the rest of the mobile to swing through changes of position trying to accommodate the initial change."¹

A faith community, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, can be more like a mobile than a carousel of individual orders.

And, when we are attentive to not just what we each want and what we can offer, we can find ourselves being gracious and attentive. We can find, in gathering together, that is

¹ Gil Rendle, "The Illusion of Congregational Happiness." <https://thecrg.org/resources/the-illusion-of-congregational-happiness>

enough space and grace for differing perspectives to be heard, for changing our perspectives to happen, and for finding that our connections with each other matter more than our proclivities at the moment.

As we gather, let's create a place where transformation is possible. (There's that word again!)

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