

Our Beloved Community: Sanctuary or Crucible?

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In these times, our neighborhoods are places where people come home after work but rarely know their neighbors. In our large public schools, our children are often lost and often do not receive the kind of caring that helps them to know that they are special unique people. Where do children go to find that kind of care? And where do we as adults go to find that special care?

My mother grew up as an only child. When she was a young girl, her parents divorced. Her mother was working full time in a community where working women were not commonplace or accepted. Even in the small community in which she grew up, my mother often felt lost and alone. She found her Episcopal church community down the street from her house, to be a place of sanctuary. She speaks about visiting the church during the week after school and usually finding someone to talk to whether it was the church secretary or the minister. The warm church environment created by these special people made her feel cared for at a time in her life when she was hurting.

This kind of community, one that reaches out and holds people through their trials, is often called “koinonia”, a Greek word that in Christian parlance denotes a “beloved community”. It is a community where we give of ourselves and are cared for in return. In seminary, I was taught that a church community is a “holding place”, a sanctuary for individuals to come to be healed. A beloved community is a place where the sacred and the everyday come together to create a mystical union of Spirit and humanity that cares for people.

When my husband was diagnosed with lymphoma when we were young and had only been UU's for about four years, our UU community surrounded us with caring. They came to our aid with meals arriving at our threshold when my husband was in the hospital, child care, friends who would come and sit with us in the hospital, phone calls, notes, just an outpouring of love from a community that we felt we were just getting to know. And with all this care came an overwhelming feeling of the Spirit of love, the overpowering embrace of being loved. For me, it was a time of spiritual awakening because I had not realized how powerful the Spirit of Community was.

My husband died a year after his diagnosis, and the community continued to care for my family during our period of grief. This experience led me to my call to ministry.

Some of you may have had similar experiences with a church community, perhaps with this one. Or you may have been on the giving end of such a story which also changes you. And if you have lived through this, you know that our beloved communities often make a life changing difference for us when we go through a difficult time in life.

But in talking about community, we must also talk about another kind of experience that many of us have had in our churches. Our church communities are filled with diverse people. People of different backgrounds and people with definite opinions. And since Unitarian Universalism values diversity, we encourage people with different viewpoints to be heard. And when different viewpoints are expressed, there can be inevitable conflict. Sometimes this conflict is handled in a healthy environment where people can express themselves but still maintain respect for one another. In a community that values diversity but also values creating an atmosphere of safety – then sanctuary can be created where difference of opinion is not only tolerated but encouraged.

But sometimes, the atmosphere of valuing different opinions breaks down.

Let me tell you a story of a congregation where this happened. The church community was a mid-sized congregation of about 250 members in the Midwest. Their beloved minister, let's call him Jack, had started his ministry with this congregation about six years ago. The congregation had bought and renovated the space that they were in now four years ago when they were much smaller. The worship space only held around 150 people. On a typical Sunday, there were enough seats for the visitors, but there were always a few members who had to stand in the back. The church board came up with a proposal that it was time to move to two services as an effort to continue growing while a Growth Task Force looked at the possibilities for moving or building a new church. This proposal was to be voted on at the congregational meeting after an open meeting was held to discuss the proposal.

Ted, the church treasurer, had been a member for five years, before becoming treasurer two years ago. He loved being treasurer. He felt a new significance to being in the church because he now felt valued and known in a new way. Although he was very shy, he now felt he knew most of the active members. When the Growth Task Force first proposed the move to two services to the board, Ted was shocked and dismayed. He couldn't imagine having to limit his exposure to just part of the church congregation on Sunday mornings. He had come to rely on the contact that he had with the whole community during the Sunday service. During the board meeting, he asked a lot of questions and voiced his dismay, but was quiet when it became apparent that the majority of the board was in favor of the proposal.

During the first congregational discussion meeting, after the proposal had been explained, and several questions had been fielded about the proposal, Ted finally raised his hand. He stood up and stayed silent for a minute. Then he began an emotional plea to the people at the meeting to consider that they could be destroying the church community with this move. He said that the church would never be the same. That the church would become divided into two communities and would feel like a more impersonal institution where people didn't know each other any more. "You wouldn't hear the Joys and Concerns of everyone so you wouldn't know what was going on in the church", Ted said. Ted finally was silent.

A few people stood up and agreed with him, but then many others counteracted his argument with explanations of how the division of the community would be prevented. Ted finally stood up and said in a quiet desperate voice, "Please, please, don't do this!" Then he abruptly left the room. The meeting ended on a somber note.

Susan, the chair of the Worship Committee, listened to Ted's words and agreed with him wholeheartedly. She couldn't imagine being able to plan for two services instead of just one. She put a lot of work into lay led services and she felt uncomfortable about the lack of control she would have if she wasn't present at both services. She felt angry that the board hadn't asked for her input on this important proposal. She went after Ted when he left.

The two agreed that they would get organized and start lobbying members against this move. By the end of the week, they had held an organizational meeting. Phone calls were flying. The minister's phone was ringing off the hook, and pledges were being cancelled by people who couldn't understand how the church board could consider such a proposal. By the end of the second week, the church was totally polarized.

Jack, the minister, was surprised, first at Ted's reaction, and then at the number of people in the church who disagreed with the proposal. But mainly, he was shocked at the way people were treating each other. In the church's chat line, the characterizations being made of one group by the other and the accusations of power being wielded were unlike anything Jack had ever seen at this church.

Jack, who had a good relationship with Ted, called him up and asked him to come in to discuss the matter with him. Ted agreed readily and the two decided to meet in Jack's office after work.

When Ted arrived, he was quiet, not his usual relaxed self, Jack realized. Jack asked him to explain what this situation felt like to him. Ted started by explaining how important the church had become to him over the past two years.

He said, "You know I feel like I'm important at this church. What I do matters here. Not just because the accounts wouldn't be done right if someone else did it. But, it's more than that. I feel like I'm valued for who I am. I've become someone here." Ted sat quietly thinking about what he had just said. Then he said, "This community matters to me. It matters to me like my family matters to me. It feels like a family to me. And breaking it up, it feels like, well, I don't know it feels wrong. It feels like a divorce. Yeah. It feels just like I felt when my parents got divorced." Having said that he looked stunned. He sat quietly. Jack nodded and just sat taking this all in.

Jack asked quietly, "So, is that what you think the church is doing – getting a divorce?"

Ted thought for a while, then nodded, “Yeah. That’s what it feels like. But you know, after I said what I thought in that meeting, several people called me. Some called me because they really agreed with me. Some called to try to change my mind. But some called because they were worried about me. They just wanted to make sure I was okay. They really showed me that they cared about me. Not just about the issue.”

After Jack and Ted talked for a while, Ted realized that he had been bringing his personal history into his feelings about the church’s situation. After he admitted this, he looked deflated and relieved. “You know what, Jack?” Ted asked. “I know this church isn’t going to split in half because of two services.”

Jack asked, “How do you know that?”

“Because I won’t let it,” he said quietly. “This church is my home and if this church is so important to me, I know it’s that important to others. This church is a place where I’ve learned who I am and that people care about me. I guess that’s what is important about this place, not whether we have two services. We won’t let it get a divorce, will we?”

Jack said, “No, we won’t.”

Afterwards, Ted did an about face and helped the church board to convince others that the plan to move to two services could be successful at helping the church to grow until they could find another building. He proposed that the coffee hour between the services be the time where the whole church community could come together.

After the issue had been resolved, the board held a “Coming Together Ritual” where individuals talked about what had happened and how it made them feel. Then each person wrote down what they wanted to give up from the incident that they no longer needed and burned the paper in the outdoor barbecue. On the papers that were burned were words like:

Not listening to one another

Blaming

Forgetting that the community is bigger than me

Fear of change

Then each person wrote down what they wanted to hold onto from what they had learned and attached it to a tree in the courtyard. On the papers attached to the tree were written words like:

This loving community

Knowing that we can disagree and still respect one another

Our value of diversity

Many of us have experienced a church conflict where we see people playing out their fears and insecurities as well as bringing their values and beliefs into the issues of the church. And when we are in a close community, we often bring our family history and dynamics to bear in the inter-relationships of the church. It's inevitable. We all do it. And because our church communities are so important to us, it becomes even more intense when a conflict about change in the church threatens to polarize the community we love.

But when the church is a place of sanctuary, a place where we have been held and cared for – often we can create a community where we can voice our disagreements, hash out our personal agendas, air our dirty laundry, and still hold one another in respect. A place where we can find our common values and lift them up and find where we disagree and respect that as diversity.

Now this story doesn't have a completely happy ending as most stories don't. Susan, the Worship Chair, continued to fight the proposal despite Ted's turnaround. She also loved the church but her partner, Andrea, who was not a member of the church, had been saying to her for years that she was doing too much for the church, that she wasn't appreciated there and it wasn't worth it for her to stay. Susan finally left the church. She realized after she left that she wasn't sure that she had really found her place there. She joined the downtown UU church and was much happier there.

People will leave church communities over issues that may not seem very important to some. But often when the issue becomes more important to them than the community itself, it may not have been the right community for them anyway. Perhaps, they hadn't felt held safely by that community for some other reason.

Communities are crucibles. Crucibles where we are asked to grow and change whether we like it or not. Working closely with people on something that feels important often will bring out our most deeply felt needs and desires. And sometimes, even often, those needs and desires aren't met. And then we can feel out of step with the community, and can even find ourselves in conflict with others. But a church that is not only a crucible, but also a sanctuary, allows that conflict, watches it play out, and then the community finds healing in coming back together and holding individuals in safe places for them to heal.

James Luther Adams, one of our Unitarian forebears, says this about church communities, "I call that church free which in covenant with that divine community-forming power brings the individual, even the unacceptable, into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes his or her integrity and spiritual freedom." (The Essential JLA, edited by George K. Beach, p. 17)

He is talking about the beloved community, that *koinonia*, which we create in fellowship with one another in our churches. What Adams calls the “divine community-forming power” is that energy that draws us together to create something lasting that holds individuals in its embrace. But it is also something that changes frequently as the individuals change and are changed by the experience of being in community. Communities are not stagnant places and those within them are often called into the transformation that is occurring.

In the UUA report called Belonging, the Meaning of Membership, this transforming process is described, “The congregation that understands its purpose in terms of offering people a place to grow and change and to make connections will also be a congregation that understands itself to be an organic entity that also grows and experiences transformation.” (p. 13)

Transformation is often an uncomfortable process where we are asked to challenge and confront who we are. In communities, that transformation can feel so uncomfortable that it sometimes feels easier to leave than to stay and figure it out together. But in communities, like in families, that process of working it out, listening to one another, saying our piece and being heard, is a process that transforms us and heals us. It transforms us into individuals who have confidence that we can be heard, that what we say is important, that we are valued for what we do and say. It transforms our communities into places where people are held in sanctuary, held in an embrace, where we hold one another through the fire of the crucible. Until we come through, transformed.