

Our Larger Fellowship by Rev. Doug McCusker

With roughly 320 million people in our country, you'd think that it would be almost impossible to put your finger on an overall emotional state of society. But unless you live completely in your own head, you can feel the anxiety and fear that seems to be permeating our collective consciousness.

I had a conversation with a colleague last week who characterized it as feeling like we are heading toward a waterfall. Imagine sitting in a raft on a flowing river. The water seems to be getting faster as you hear the roar of water, but you can't see what's ahead. All you know is that upstream things were calm and predictable, but now something has changed and it makes you very anxious. You are being pulled along to something, and you're not quite sure of what to do.

I feel the anxiety in my bones. I am watching how people are starting to get whipped up into a frenzy and turn on one another. I'm seeing the fear turn to anger and that makes me more anxious.

Shortly after arriving in Fredericksburg, I had coffee with Rev. Joe Hensley, the rector of St. George's Episcopal church. He invited me to join a nascent Interfaith Clergy group that was forming in response to an ugly situation that occurred before I arrived.

Micah Ministries is a faith-based non-profit that provides services for the homeless community in town. They are supported primarily by 7 churches in the heart of old-town Fredericksburg. Last year Micah ministries had secured support from the City Council to open up a drop-in shelter downtown. I don't know the particulars, but apparently residents protested against having homeless people congregate in their neighborhood. City Council withdrew their support and the plan fell apart.

Then in the fall, another incident occurred in Spotsylvania over a plan to relocate the Islamic Center of Fredericksburg's to a new site. Some residents came to the meeting and took out their fear of terrorism on their Muslim neighbors in an ugly tirade that went viral across the media.

Our group has been meeting every month since then to figure out what a bunch of clergy from different religions can do to help restore a community of compassion here in Fredericksburg. Our plan was to organize a community-wide conversation about what it means to love thy neighbor.

Some of us wanted to jump right in and organize something. But, we discovered that we had to have that conversation among ourselves first. Just because we were clergy didn't mean that we were a community. We had to establish our relationships, lift up our religious differences and get to know each other as human beings first. And from that dialog common ground has emerged. Now we are ready to bear witness to the fear together.

We all live lives of quiet desperation, but lately the desperation is getting quite loud. In this day and age of the Internet, social media, so-called reality TV, and commercialized news, the filters that contain our everyday, healthy level of fear have broken down.

When I was a little child, my parents and elders were terrified over the possibility of a nuclear war. In our country we understood it as the consequences of an "us-versus-them" confrontation between the "free world" and communists. The safety valves from

constant fear of mutual annihilation were proxy wars in South East Asia and civil wars in South America.

These wars were costly in terms of lives, property and national treasure. The Vietnam War was brutal and divisive. Almost everyone knew someone who perished in the war. It put a dent in our self-inflated identity as a superior nation that could always win. It even helped precipitate a reactionary movement toward peace and love within our popular culture. That was almost 50 years ago. So what are we so afraid of today?

Ironically, we seem to be afraid of the very thing that we fought so hard for: a world community. In those ensuing 50 years we have become more and more interconnected as a world. Millions of global transactions occur every day. Goods and services crisscross the planet in constant motion. People are moving seamlessly between borders and ideas are flowing among cultures.

This is a classic case of “be careful for what you wish for.” America has been the global sheriff ensuring that markets open up so that free-wheeling capitalism can flourish. That has been our mission since the end of World War II. And we’ve mainly succeeded.

The goal was to establish a global economy in which the United States remained on the top. Things didn’t exactly go as planned. In this era of post-colonialism, the game plan has been to take advantage of relatively cheap labor wherever you can find it, anywhere in the world. At first that siphoned off the unskilled labor here at home. Essentially the poor people just got poorer. Our stores remained stocked with cheap goods so most people didn’t notice unless they were among the poor.

But eventually, the emerging markets grew up and companies moved their manufacturing and middle-class jobs overseas or across the border. This has wreaked havoc on isolated communities in this country, while it has brought prosperity to others. Now more and more people are beginning to notice and feel the pain.

America did such a great job of opening up the free flow of labor, capital, education and raw materials that now we see emerging countries like Brazil, Russia, India and China as economic rivals to whom we are inextricably linked. Their success is not the threat. The threat is not being able to control what these nations do with their new found economic power.

In a world of structured around competition, lofty ideals such as cooperation and peaceful harmony are seen as means to an end game of power and control. And when that feels like its slipping away, or at least being exerted by others, it breeds fear and anxiety. I believe that a world community which we don’t control is the waterfall that we are approaching. We can embrace it or fear it.

When we look at the world through the lens of scarcity, cooperation and harmony are seen as the culprits of unwanted change. The other person is seen as a rival, hell bent on taking what is ours. The other person cannot be trusted, especially when they look, think and act differently than us. The newly arrived immigrant, the homeless person in our town or even the people next door are no longer our neighbors, but are strangers.

But when we look at the world through the lens of abundance, we see cooperation and harmony as ends rather than means. At a TED talk several years ago, journalist and philosopher Lia Diskin related a beautiful and touching story of a tribe in Africa.

She explained how an anthropologist had been studying the habits and customs of this tribe, and when he finished his work, he had to wait for transportation that would take him to the airport to return home. He'd always been surrounded by the children of the tribe, so to help pass the time before he left, he proposed a game for the children to play.

He'd bought lots of candy and sweets in the city, so he put everything in a basket with a beautiful ribbon attached. He placed it under a solitary tree, and then he called the kids together. He drew a line on the ground and explained that they should wait behind the line for his signal. And that when he said "Go!" they should rush over to the basket, and the first to arrive there would win all the candies.

When he said "Go!" they all unexpectedly held each other's hands and ran off towards the tree as a group. Once there, they simply shared the candy with each other and happily ate it.

The anthropologist was very surprised. He asked them why they had all gone together, especially if the first one to arrive at the tree could have won everything in the basket - all the sweets.

A young girl simply replied: "How can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?"

The anthropologist was dumbfounded! For months and months, he'd been studying the tribe, yet it was only now that he really understood their true essence...

Africans call this "Ubuntu", roughly translated as "I am because we are." Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "Ubuntu is the essence of being human. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go the extra mile for the sake of another.

Ubuntu is a belief that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore, you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging."

In his book *Tatoos on the Heart*, Greg Boyle writes, "Kinship is more than service; it's being one with the other. When we feel belonging, we enter into oneness that transcends separation. That oneness, that belonging, that kinship doesn't depend on blood, it's based on love."

We don't love another out of obligation. Love happens in its many shades and varieties when we connect with the common essence of humanity in another person. When we see through the layers of differences and through the walls of protection encasing our hearts, we love.

It's no wonder that we love those people closest to us because in them we've uncovered the eternal spark that we instantly recognize, and which binds us together as fellow travelers in this thing we call life. But the real challenge, I would dare say the ultimate challenge, is in seeing the whole world through that lens of connection.

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis equates that spark of connection with ultimate reality, with God. In his beautiful poem *Between* he writes,

God is known
not alone,
but in relationship.

Not as a separate, lonely power,
but through our kinship,
our friendship,
through our healing and binding
and raising up of each other.

To know God is to know others,
To love God is to love others,
To hear God is to hear others.

Our Transcendentalist forbearers called it the “Divine Spark” that we as humans can intuitively recognize in each other. It’s a quality of being that transcends the boundaries between me and you and everything else. “I am because we are.” It’s a realization that our humanity is made by community.

I truly believe that everyone has the capacity to experience this oneness of being, even when we are afraid or feeling powerless. We find it in the smallest things and in the expanse of the universe when we move beyond our fear of separation and allow that sense of love to break through.

Psalm 133 of the Hebrew Scriptures expresses it beautifully: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the dew on Mount Hermon where the Lord gave the blessing of life forevermore.” This psalm was written as a song for pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to pay homage to the source of that unity. It also praises the blessedness of kindred souls across the family of humankind. In that unity is life forevermore.

Humans have always sensed that bond of kinship from the earliest family and tribal units living in the forest or huddled in a cave around the warmth of a fire. History is essentially the story of humankind expanding that kinship to larger and larger units. This is what I call the Larger Fellowship.

As Unitarian Universalists that covenant of kinship is at the very core of our faith tradition. Universal kinship is the thread that weaves our 7 principles together; starting with the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, acceptance of one another, a world community living in peace, and culminating with respect for the interdependence of all existence of which we are a part. The kinship of human relations is inextricably linked to our Unitarian Universalist world view.

And yet, it is so very hard to live into that vision. From the beginning of our lives we are bombarded with socialized messages that shrink our bonds to smaller and smaller units of belonging. Kinship is chopped up into infinite pieces like race, creed, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class and generation.

These classifications are artificial constructs. Their made up by society in order to simplify ways that we are related to each other. That can actually be a good thing if it reinforces our connections with others. If we could shape our mental model of our place in the world around those connections, we would see that everyone and everything is related.

Universal kinship through peace and world community is a hard and long struggle. And we all have a part to play to make it happen. When we recognize the interdependence of all life and act on it to build community we find peace in our

neighborhoods and cities. If we learn to live into the spirit of Ubuntu and recognize that we belong to each other because we are made by each other than there will be peace in the nations and the world.

It's the relationships we form out of our kinship with each other that matters. And when we see that glimpse of shared humanity and reach out with love we all matter.

May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it so?