

The Spiritual Practice of Conversation by Rev. Doug McCusker

There are some things that are done better in small groups than by the entire congregation. One of those is fellowship. That's ironic because we are called the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg. But, the real work of fellowship is better done in small groups where deep relationships can be formed to nourish our spiritual needs.

Our name was christened back when the congregation itself was a small group and fellowship was the primary mission of the organization. We were a single cell unit. The charter members in the first decade of this organization, worked very hard for months to launch the new adventure.

They bonded over long discussions, many hours of volunteer work, risk-taking and sacrifice. On Sunday mornings, they listened to presentations and discussed among themselves their perspectives on how that information affected their lives. Everybody got a say and everyone was heard. That kind of fellowship is powerful. It is a spiritual practice that can transform us and move us to be our better selves.

But now, the Fellowship is over 200 strong and on Sunday mornings we usually have over 100 people together for the worship service. Connecting on a personal and emotionally intimate level in a crowd that large is difficult. Bearing one's soul in public is inappropriate and downright weird.

In small groups though, where there are appropriate levels of trust and familiarity, we can find healing and understanding. We can delve deeply into topics and explore our emotions without judgment as part of a cohesive cell that has a shared focus. When we find true fellowship here in this Fellowship, it is when we are in small groups.

Celebration, on the other hand, is often done better by the entire congregation. A hundred people singing together in service, hearing a heartfelt message, or partying afterwards over a potluck dinner is enhanced when there are lots of people to amp up the energy.

As spiritual beings, humans need both cell and celebration. Small groups are the cells where we can let our hair down and get to know people beyond their resume. Large groups are the celebrations where we can feel small, humble and part of a greater whole.

Regardless of its size, fellowship is an essential life-giving function of any congregation. Our goal should be nothing less than to ensure that every member has an opportunity and invitation to be a part of some small group where they can experience community at a deep level.

Before I was a minister, I was a lay member of Accotink UU Church in Burke, VA. It was in the small groups that I first heard the call to ministry. Not one group per se, but through the combined power that they all provided, which enabled me to not only listen to others but to listen to myself. I led small discussion based religious education classes like Building Your Own Theology and Articulating Our UU Faith. I was a member of the Board of Trustees, in which we debated tough problems in order to find common ground. But by far, the most rewarding small groups for me were the Covenant Groups. Here at UUFF we call them Chalice Groups.

Those in my covenant group were the first people other than my immediate family who I told about my call to ministry. When I was having trouble at work, they listened attentively without trying to fix my problems. It was in those small groups that I

honed the skill of deep listening that serves me now as a minister. And it was in those small groups that I felt the sense of belonging to a religious faith that doesn't demand allegiance but does demand honesty of intellect, emotion and compassion.

Speaking one's truth and listening to another's without the need to be right is a truly liberating feeling. Especially now with our polarizing politics and hyper-competitive work places, we need spaces where honest relationship is the priority. But these places don't just happen. They have to be created, maintained and protected. We do that by promising to treat each other with respect and holding each other accountable.

At the heart of any small discussion group is a covenant. This is a shared promise about how we will treat each other. The stronger the sense of covenant, the stronger the trust and the stronger the bond. And counter-intuitively, the bond is usually strengthened after the covenant is broken and then repaired through reconciliation and restorative justice.

I've been in small groups that went to a deeper level of sharing because we screwed up and yet found a way to love each other back into the group. It's tough to really know the boundaries until we smack into them face first and reveal our imperfections. Our egos and insecurities can come out when we an invisible button is pushed. That is bound to happen from time to time. The real work is not avoiding conflict, but learning to stay in covenant even through the hard stuff.

About 10 years ago, I was in a covenant group that was discussing the role of anger and whether it was appropriate even when someone else causes you harm. One of the people, who identified as a Buddhist UU, expressed his belief that anger is never appropriate and that it is only amplifies suffering. After he was finished talking another person took exception to that point of view and told a personal story about a time when she was assaulted. Even though we weren't supposed to debate or cross-talk, the discussion between the two people got heated. The facilitator didn't step in right away and it started turning ugly. Both people were shouting at each other while the rest of us sat there in disbelief that our friendly group had devolved into conflict.

Once the facilitator regained control of the conversation, there was this really awkward silence. It seemed to last forever. One of the people who had done the yelling started collecting their belongings like they were about to leave. We asked them to stay and then one of us in the group, pulled out the covenant and just started reading it aloud. When they got to the part about holding each other accountable and admitting when we slip up, the two people who were fighting started to cry. We let them talk and we held them in our circle without shaming them. Whatever we were supposed to talk about that night went out the window and the real conversation started. At some point, everyone was hugging each other. We knew that we had crossed a line, but rather than destroy the group it strengthened it by forcing us to find the human capacity to forgive and love despite our failings.

A small group like that doesn't get to that level of trust overnight. And it doesn't require conflict either. But it does require us to listen and accept each other's truth. I am a firm believer that relationships form community, enabling us to withstand the fear and hate that try to pull us down. We must listen and understand one another to be in relationship. We don't always have to agree. In fact, it's also important that we maintain a level of differentiation, and that we listen to our own moral conscience. When all those ingredients are present, spiritual transformation can occur.

I believe that relationships are a reflection of God. In our relationships, we experience that mysterious interchange of creation in which we are building the world in our image. Every relationship, no matter if it is one on one, or in a group, is an opportunity for growth and revelation. Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman called this divine process Creative Interchange. For him, God is not a being. God is a social process that saves humankind from evil and endows us with the greatest good.

Creative Interchange is an ongoing process that all of us are engaged in from our infancy till the day we die. As humans, we are existentially creative beings. We interact with our environment in order to create meaning that establishes our emotional, intellectual and spiritual grounding. But we can't do this alone. In order to expand our consciousness, we must absorb the stories of others.

Wieman says that Creative Interchange means getting the viewpoint of the other person and integrating it into our own consciousness so that we understand them sympathetically even when we don't agree with them. The result is a deepening of community.

There is someone I know, who has been sending me emails with links to Alt-Right websites that tell a completely different story than what I understand happened at Charlottesville. I looked at one, and it turned my stomach. My first reaction was to send him back a blistering response. But that would get us nowhere. We're not in covenant and there are no ground rules for our conversation. Simply put, we are not in relationship so there is no connection to have a real conversation.

Email is a terrible device for deep conversation, especially one about such emotionally charged issues like racism, politics and religion. I have asked this person to have a civil conversation in person with me, but so far all I get is emails. I'm beginning to think that they are being sent by a bot rather than a person.

On September 30, we will be hosting a workshop for the whole Fredericksburg community called A Pathway to Civility in Communications. Registration is now open, but its filling up fast. We will have professional facilitators help us hone our communication skills so that we bring respect, courtesy, empathy and compassion to our discussions, no matter how divisive they may seem on the surface. Because when we let fear and negative emotions take over our conversations, we make assumptions and shut out the other person's feelings.

Creative transformation comes through teaching, learning, healing, giving, welcoming, remembering, and tuning into the spirit of the community. None of these things can occur in isolation. Transformation requires relationship.

The supreme Good, or God for short, is a deepening of community rooted in love, mutual support and understanding. That which saves us and transforms us is not faith in a belief system, but the concern that we have for one another. "Love Thy God by Loving Thy Neighbor".

This Fellowship would truly live up to its name, if every one of us belonged to at least one small discussion group in which we could deepen our relationships with one another while engaging in a responsible search for truth and meaning. I realize that this involves a time commitment, but anything worth doing requires commitment and practice.

Small group ministry as a spiritual practice comes in many forms and we have lots of different groups that meet regularly. We have men's groups, women's groups,

book discussion groups, the Sunday discussion group, a youth group, support groups, theology groups, community service groups, religious education classes and of course, Chalice Groups. Look at the back of your bulletin for the point of contact for a group that sparks your interest.

Valerie and I oversee the Chalice Groups, which meet once a month either at the Fellowship or in member's homes. Each one has up to 10 people and 2 facilitators. We have 3 groups now and we are forming new ones that will start in September. Come see me or Valerie if you want to join or have any questions.