

“The Ripples of Community”

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I recently read a story in which a woman was severely depressed the year after her father died. She moved to a new apartment but was unable to unpack her boxes for months. She was ashamed and didn't know what to do. She knew it shouldn't be that difficult *to just unpack* but she couldn't do it. A good friend of hers knew she was struggling but felt helpless. He decided to email a group of her local friends without her knowledge and told them their friend was struggling and needed their help. He suggested they all head over to her house, unpack her boxes, bring some food, and make it fun.

One night the doorbell rang and 10 of her friends barged in and got to work. She protested at first that they couldn't come in because she hadn't unpacked. But, they ignored her and got down to business. They unpacked her boxes, put away her books, hung her pictures, and organized her closet while someone set up a taco station. She said that at the end of the night, she looked around speechless, and one of the men there who tended to be a quiet, taciturn guy said, “Listen, what we did today was a barn-raising.” The woman said she felt shame, she felt like she wasn't worth it, but her friends didn't wait for her to ask, they showed up and took over. She said this plan could have backfired though. She could have been offended, insulted, hurt, but her friend took a chance anyway. The woman said, “Being a friend takes commitment. A willingness to take that risk.”

I think being part of a community is the same. Sometimes we have to take risks when we are in community with one another. I have not always gotten it right when I have taken a risk, when I have reached out to help or merely shared my affection for someone else, but as I look back on all the times someone took a risk with me, I always appreciated it in the end. And their actions often inspire me to be bolder, to dare to tell someone I care for them even if the response isn't what I was hoping or possibly expecting.

Have there been times someone held either a literal or figurative barn raising for you? Times when your community showed up on your doorstep and did not take no for an answer? I hope you let them in. And I hope afterwards you carried that love and affection with you.

In the two years I have been at First Parish, there has been a lot of conversation about what this community is. What do you mean to one another and to Wayland? Who are we during the pandemic? Who are we now that some people are coming back but not everyone is? What is our vision? And, now, who will we be without Rev. Stephanie? What is tying us together?

I can't answer that for you, that is work that you will be doing with the Interim minister, but most importantly, with one another. I do hope you stick around to find out. I hope you see the same good bones of this congregation that I see.

At my home congregation in Oklahoma City, our minister resigned during my second meeting of the Board of Trustees, we spent an entire year without a minister, and then had an Interim minister, and during that time our long-time Director of

Religious Education retired and then we had an acting DRE and then an Interim DRE. That experience brought home to me that we were the church. As a member of the Board, I took seriously what I thought was my duty to ensure the entity that I had pledged so much time and energy toward would survive, not only during my time there, but long after me. I wanted it to remain a beacon of liberal religion in a very conservative city.

I think Unitarian Universalism can save people's lives. It can give people a place to belong who often do not find acceptance elsewhere, possibly because of one of their identities, but also maybe because of their political or religious (or lack thereof) beliefs. But, most importantly, it can give them, and all of us, a community.

But it can also be a place that harms us. I'm sure many of us in this room have felt snubbed or left out at one time or another. Maybe we felt patronized or even offended by something someone else said? I know I have. For all the love and friendship that we find in communities such as this one, we also can find rejection and suffering. Then it becomes a question of: What we are going to do about it? What has amazed me about moving to New England is that there are UU churches everywhere. This is not the norm in other parts of the country. You have options! So, why do you stay here? And how can you work, not only to make it a better place, but also perhaps manage your own expectations for what it can be?

This place will never be perfect, in fact, some of the people and even the worship services *will* set your teeth on edge. But, one of the great things about being in covenant with one another is that we can always try again. We can find the person who is making us a little batty and get to know them better or even possibly talk to them

about what has been bothering us. When I first joined the UU church in Oklahoma City, I fell in with a crowd that was a little skeptical of others (to put it nicely). They told me things about people that, in turn, made me hold those people at arms-length. Once some of the crowd I had been hanging out with left, and I was in small groups or on committees with some of the people they had warned me about, I got to know those people better and it turns out, yeah, some of them might have been a bit prickly, but there were often reasons for that but once I gave them a chance, I often learned from them. And because I opened myself up to them and allowed myself to soften a bit, I got to see another side of a lot of people and many of them had a significant impact on my life. I learned from people in ways I never would have if I had closed myself off, or if I had given up on the congregation entirely (as I sometimes felt inclined to do in my anger).

The same goes for First Parish in Wayland, so many of you have offered me a kind word of encouragement or sent me an interesting article, and you have no idea what impact that has had on my life and will continue to have. You have taught me how to be a minister. The kindnesses you afforded me but also the lessons you taught me with some constructive feedback will be felt throughout the rest of my ministry. Your impact, though it will likely forgotten by you, will not be forgotten by me.

And I'm sure all of us could say this about other people in our lives and in our communities who have no idea the impact they have had on our lives, and knowing all of you, they could likely say the same about your influence on their lives. Because we decided to show up and engage with a community, our impact is likely more than we can even imagine. I think sometimes as we go about our daily lives, we forget that. This

notion that what we do matters, even in small ways, As the reading stated earlier, it is these small moments of kindness that are the “true dwelling of the holy.” So, even if no one remembers exactly what we said in any given moment, they will remember that we showed up for each other.

After a particularly difficult time in my life, I remember returning to church. No one knew what I was going through or what I had been experiencing or why I had disappeared for a few weeks, but sitting in my pew in the back of the sanctuary, hearing the choir, and later joining in with the congregation as we all sang together, I could barely control my emotions. It meant so much to me to just be in this space surrounded by people who I felt both close to and also barely knew.

No one knew what I was going through but I still felt held in love. The music in particular brought me back and reminded me of the me before all of this and reminded me that my life would continue after. That I would once again return to this community and be a part of it in whatever way I could show up in that moment. And there were times I had to back away and times when I went rushing in with full force.

That is one of the joys of being a part of a community like this, we will still be here, in the mundanity of every day, in the moments of great triumph and joy, and also during those times when you need to back away for a bit.

You will always have a pew to sit in and your voice will still be a welcome addition to any song.

Blessed Be.

