

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
 Hunger for Authentic Community  
 September 19, 2010 Rev. Sam Trumbore

**Spoken Meditation**

Spirit of Life and Love  
 Be present in our awareness  
     as we turn inward,  
         to witness and feel you flowing through us.

The sight of yellow, orange and red  
     frosting the top of trees and spilling down the sides;  
 The cooler mornings,  
     just cold enough to cloud the breath;  
 The familiar sight of children waiting for yellow school buses  
     and the annoyance of being stuck behind one in traffic;  
 Remind us that fall begins this week.

As the sun crosses the equator, headed south,  
     tree sap descends into the ground,  
     falling leaves, drained of life, are tossed by the wind, and  
     bullfrog and bear prepare their winter resting places.

Persephone leaves us behind and journeys below the surface.

This can be a time to honor the urge to hibernate  
     turning our attention from summer recreational activities,  
     and preparing a warm place for winter rest.

During this inward turning, quieter time,  
     may we, too, go deeper, below the surface of our lives.  
     may we use that stillness, for reflection and renewal,

Knowing ... the summer will return to us again  
     just long enough from now  
         to feel as if we have been reborn  
             rediscovering crocuses, daffodils and lilacs  
             as if for the first time.

## Sermon

Making your way in the world today, takes everything you've got.  
Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go  
Where everybody knows your name,  
And they're always glad you came;  
You want to be where you can see,  
Our troubles are all the same;  
You want to be where everybody knows your name.

The lyrics by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo to the theme song of the television show "Cheers," that ran from 1982 to 1993, expresses well the hunger for authentic community many of us in this room experience.

I had the good fortune to grow up in a small college town where people did know my name. My father was chairman of the local Democratic district. My mother ran for state representative in 1972. I knew all the kids my age, in our neighborhood, because we all walked to West Park Elementary School just a couple of blocks away. And then, we went to middle school and high school together. Newark, Delaware is my home town; growing up, it was the center of my universe, a place where the Trumbore name was known and respected.

And then, I graduated from high school. My advanced placement friends all went off to Ivy League schools ... and I stayed home to attend the University of Delaware in Newark. As both my parents were University of Delaware employees, I got free tuition. What made *financial* sense for us - didn't end up making *social* sense. After my high school friends dispersed, leaving me living at home, a townie, I found it hard to join a new community and make friends on campus.

In my junior year, 33 years ago in October, I decided to leave home and go find myself. It was the thing people of my generation were doing – though I think I was on the tail end of this trend. I bought a rail pass, and boarded the train in Wilmington. I traveled across the country looking for adventure, found a little, and ended up, two weeks later, in a residential hotel in Palo Alto, California, living with addicts, the psychologically challenged, and vets with PTSD. Palo Alto was a significant destination for me, at the time, because it was and still is the headquarters of Hewlett Packard, a company I had worked for in Avondale, Pennsylvania, a company I was loyal to, that I hoped would hire me as an electronic

technician. (And they did!)

I remember my first day in Palo Alto. Unknown and insignificant, I was a stranger in a strange land. My anonymity brought on feelings of loneliness, anxiety and emptiness. No longer a traveler, I had to settle down and make a life for myself.

At the time, I wasn't aware that I had followed a well known trail. In journeying from a small town to a large metropolitan area, I was repeating a pattern of rural to urban migration, driven by industrialization, that has been repeated many, many times. A century ago, half the population tilled the soil to produce food. Today only 1% do agricultural work. The agricultural workers were driven off the farm and into the cities to look for a job. I, too, was seeking my fortune in what would soon be called Silicon Valley, in the booming electronics industry there that didn't exist in my home town.

Sitting in that hotel room, all by myself, I realized I had lost my sense of community. In pre-industrial times, people's sense of community was primarily geographic. For many, the legacy of that time is their family surname that associates them with a clan or region. Names like MacDuff, Stuart, Murphy, Van Der Onken, Woo, Chan, Takahari, Spinoza, Pinski, or Obama, all point toward a place of family origin. In the great world wide movement of populations - that is accelerating today - geographic communities are no longer genetically, ethnically or religiously homogeneous. The migration to this country and the decimation of American indigenous peoples and cultures created new communities here without deep genetic and geographic roots. The East coast has a little more history than the West but all the American communities are still quite young and fluid as compared to more rigid communities and social classes found elsewhere in the world. The United States is the forerunner for a world wide trend undermining geography as a source of authentic community.

American individualism has further accelerated the erosion of community. Oft quoted Alex de Tocqueville saw this trend early on in our history. He wrote, "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." Robert Bellah, in his widely discussed book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, studied and roundly criticized our society's commitment to individualism that is eroding our sense of public life.

The open, democratic society we cherish that values freedom, self-determination, individuality, diversity, dissent, privacy and even anonymity, can work at cross purposes with the forces that support communities. Individuals can easily segment and divide communities by focusing on their differences. Yet the scientific method used in the pursuit of knowledge and the innovation our economic system highly values, demands the freedom for individuals to question conventional practices, think differently and disruptively break the old mold.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, in 1887, introduced two terms that can help us understand the tension between individualism and community in modern society:

“Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft.” Gemeinschaft, often translated as community, identifies a group of individuals bound together by a common commitment that transcends their self interests. Extended families and tribal societies are the exemplar of this kind of community with strong personal relationships. Qualities that describe these communities are loyalty, fidelity, rootedness, solidarity, public responsibility, neighborliness, and pride. This is what most of us would identify as authentic community.

Gesellschaft is the kind of social activity that is driven by self interest. Increasingly, individuals come together in a workplace without any higher purpose than making money. It is in the employer's self interest to create the illusion of gemeinschaft in the workplace to stimulate qualities like loyalty, fidelity and commitment. The synthetic nature of this community, however, is revealed when there is an economic downturn and workers are laid off.

This sets up a difficult dilemma in modern society. Many are missing or losing the experience of authentic community by spending more and more time in large corporate work environments that show little commitment to the individual person beyond his or her utility. To find authentic community, they must look for it outside their jobs. And for the modern, mobile worker, traditional geographic sources of community are just not there to support them.

Unemployed and new in town, the resolution of my loneliness, that Sunday, was to take the bus to the Palo Alto Unitarian Church. Having grown up as a Unitarian in Newark, I hoped it would be a good place for me to meet people. The architecture of the building, the bookstore full of interesting, liberal books, the blue hymnal, and the stimulating theme of the sermon, all felt comfortingly familiar. After the service, I went to the membership table and made friends with Peggy Polk, from whom, I rented a room, about a year later. That day, I knew I had found an authentic community, one that sustained me emotionally as I healed from being seriously injured in a car accident about a month later and sustained me as I got clear about wanting to finish my engineering degree at UC Berkeley two years later.

Immigrants replace family and geographic sources of gemeinschaft left behind with voluntary associations. Voluntary associations like the Palo Alto Unitarian church and this congregation, are not linked to a person or a place but to a set of values, commitments and practices to which an individual can identify and connect. A congregation like ours can provide a religious community that transcends the physical community in which it is located. The church and the people were unknown to me that first Sunday I visited, but the shared values, commitments and practices *I recognized* made them feel familiar, like my Unitarian Fellowship back home in Newark.

And you don't have to have grown up Unitarian Universalist to have this coming home experience. Countless times people come into our congregations and feel that sense of connection to our values, commitments and practices. How often have we heard, "I've been a Unitarian Universalist all my life and didn't realize you existed" and "Finally, a community that accepts me for who I am, a place that wants authenticity rather than imitation."

Though we are an open and welcoming congregation, our values do narrow down who will feel at home here. Our free and responsible search for truth and meaning is not attractive to everyone. Our intentional welcoming of diversity is definitely not common. Our commitment to the interdependent web of existence should be more common than it is.

As important as shared values, commitments and practices are to liberate us from our loneliness, we still want to remain individuals within a community. We want to be known and appreciated too. And we want to contribute to the larger whole. Authentic community needs to offer both the recognition of our worth and dignity as individuals and a path to make a positive difference in that community and to the larger community of which we are a part. In most voluntary associations, this happens, for most people, in small groups.

Small groups are a very important way people develop a sense of community here. Unless you're an extremely extroverted person, our coffee hour, after the service, tends to scare visitors more than it welcomes them. Better to hang out in the back of Emerson or linger at the Welcome Table in the lobby until the mob in Channing Hall, lining up for bagels and coffee, thins out a little. Coffee hour just isn't a good place for most people to make connections. It is a great place, however, to *reconnect* with people you *already* know. The better place to make new connections is in small groups.

We have many small affinity groups that are great places to build community. A great community for people who like to sing is our choir. For those who prefer a quiet beginning on Sunday mornings, we have a very congenial mindfulness meditation group that I lead in the sanctuary at nine. The Philosophy Group meets Tuesday mornings. The Projects and Quilts group meets Wednesday morning. Avid readers will enjoy the Walker Book Club and the Spirituality Book Group. Writers and poets will want to get involved with the people who publish our yearly literary magazine called the Oriel. Those with green thumbs, or at least an interest in plants, are welcome in our gardening group. Those with ecological concerns can participate in our Green Sanctuary Committee. Peace activists will want to check out our new Peace Team. Those interested in community organizing can get involved with ARISE, A Regional Initiative Supporting Empowerment. Support groups meet here like our Cancer Support Group. And all should consider the adult learning opportunities that will be offered this fall. And this isn't a complete list since new small groups form every year! I haven't mentioned the enjoyable social events throughout the year like circle dinners and, of course, UU Weekend at Silver Bay, October 15-17, is a celebration of small and large group

activity.

One small group that deserves special mention is our Small Group Ministry program that is preparing to start up again in October. These small groups meet twice a month to discuss topics that stimulate personal reflection and sharing and create a strong sense of community. If you'd like to participate this year, please speak with John Sherman.

I'm feeling the need to comment on one thing that has changed in 33 years: Internet based social networking. I didn't tweet my adventures as I rode Amtrak from city to city visiting old friends. I didn't have facebook or meetup.com as a resource to resettle in California. While social networking creates the *feeling* of community, I suspect its reality is still very thin. And it can't hold a candle to face-to-face community. Much like how our coffee hour works, facebook is a wonderful place to *maintain* existing relationships but not a very good for creating new ones, much less creating new communities of people who don't already know each other. One can have thousands of facebook friends and still feel very lonely.

So, yes, this is a great place to experience authentic community. And we're really good at welcoming people into that community through our network of small groups. But creating a strong sense of community for the whole congregation can be a bigger challenge. If you want to hear more about that, come back next week!

## **Benediction**

I close with wise words from Kurt Vonnegut: What should young people do with their lives today? ... the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

May we be inspired to build and support this already stable and thriving congregation, while widening its embrace of all who share our values and commitments.

May we offer each other, here, an authentic experience of community.