

“Belonging Together”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Readings

“Community Means Strength,” Starhawk

Selection from Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community, Malidoma Patrice Somé

Sermon

My family and I moved to Vermont eight years ago now. This was a move back for my spouse who grew up here, and a move to a new place for me and our then six-month old son. For the first year and some change of living here, I was a stay-at-home parent, and my spouse was working full-time outside the home.

Moving to a new place can be daunting for a lot of reasons. And, one of the things I found most daunting was making new friendships and finding new community.

Before our move, my spouse and I had community at the ready, primarily through the community of students also enrolled in my partner’s graduate school program which ended just before we moved.

This community had provided a strong friendship and support network for both us. The university had several complexes for graduate student housing, and we had found a one-bedroom apartment in one where several other students from the same program also lived. We hosted one another in our apartments for dinner and game nights. A group of us whose partners were in the program became friends

and would get together for brunch especially during exam periods when our significant others were holed up in a study carol at the library.

When our son was born, this graduate school community supported us in incredible ways. Our son could often be found attached with a baby carrier to a 20- or 30-something year-old grad student who was strolling along the paths around our housing duplex. Others learned how much he liked to be held and bounced up and down while you were seated on an exercise ball. Many meals were dropped off in those first couple of months. And, friends even threw us a baby shower which got us all set with a stroller and many other crucial items.

My partner and I had actually experienced several years of this kind of ready-made community as we hopped from city to city adding more degrees to our resumes.

And, for the first time in a while, with our move to Vermont, community wasn't being handed to us.

That first year was lonely time for me. I'm someone who finds great fulfillment in my vocation, and I wasn't working. My family also lives pretty far away. I didn't have any friends living close by. I also didn't yet know other UU colleagues very well.

I spent lots of time online and scouring the local papers searching out how I could spend my time with other people. Since I was home with a baby, I spent much of that year at library story times and meet-ups for parents. The timing would hopefully work out between mealtimes and nap times to make it out and back home.

Despite these regular outings, the loneliness continued for some time. I longed to belong, and to be part of a community again. It would take a few more years for the pieces to come together.

This longing to belong is something I think we all share. Whether we're new to a community or have been around a long time, belonging is a core component of our well-being and spiritual wholeness.

Our worship theme this month of September is belonging. This whole year with our worship themes we consider the paths we must lean into and relearn as we travel together into our complex, challenging and hoped for future. Each theme will lift up a particular spiritual path crucial to this journey of birthing a new normal worthy of our hopes. And, for this month of September, we explore the spiritual path of belonging.

Community is a core and essential aspect of belonging. I believe that each of you has at least an inkling of that belief or you wouldn't be here today. We know that a spiritual community is one of the places where belonging can be felt and nurtured.

During that first year living in Montpelier, I was chatting with another parent after a story session at the library about our own trials with finding community. I had mentioned that I was a Unitarian Universalist minister. It just so happened that I was being considered for the position here, though not publicly yet. This parent excitedly told me how they'd been to this congregation a few times and were hoping to return. It warmed my heart that a UU congregation was a place they had come to looking for community.

Community is something so many of us missed dearly over the past few years as physical distancing led to social isolation, and we had to create new ways of staying together in community - whether here at church or in other aspects of our lives.

Starhawk writes, "We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community."

This longing to “go home” was strong during the pandemic, and I believe it remains strong as we each discern how we will enter into community once again. Learning what it’s like to be in this new place of considering how to balance certain risks with the needs we have for human connection.

The value of community was made clear to me over the summer when I went to visit UCM member, Amy Wales, at her home in her final days.

I happened to be there at the same time as the social worker from Home, Health, and Hospice, who Amy had been in close contact with in her final months.

With Amy resting quietly nearby, we talked about her incredible resilience and deep spirituality.

The social worker also made a comment that has stuck with me.

He noted that he works with many people at the end of their lives and that he has noticed that it is the people, like Amy, who have a strong connection to a faith community, who are usually best supported in those final days.

The support from the community comes in the form of meals dropped off, errands run, and visits in the quiet hours of simply wading through the uncertainty of what comes next.

Belonging in community can stitch one into garment of mutual care and support that holds you in times of great need.

This community, and other communities you may be a part of, faced incredible challenges over the last two and a half years. Now here we are, having crossed a threshold into a new way of being community and of nurturing belonging together.

Across this threshold, I believe that most of the ways that we already know how to be a community, how to show up for one another and care for one another, are still necessary.

Community is still built and strengthened when we go the bedside of a friend in their final days.

Community is still built and strengthened when we offer someone a ride who is no longer driving.

Community is still built and strengthened when we bring our potluck dish to the table and break bread together.

Community is still built and strengthened when we listen deeply to one another.

As we come back together, we can engage in these practices that demonstrate the power and necessity of community care and support. These are practices that I know are strengths of this congregation.

Yet, despite our best efforts, the feeling of belonging is not a constant, unchanging state. It can fluctuate. There are times when we might feel incredibly connected, at peace, and at home within a community. There are also times when our sense of belonging wanes. We feel misunderstood or devalued or excluded.

This was true before the pandemic, and I think this remains true.

As members of a community, we can consider and give attention to how we make it possible for all to feel not only welcome but also a sense of true belonging.

The author Brene Brown makes a helpful distinction when she writes that belonging isn't fitting in. "Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are," she writes.

Authentic expression of who we are is necessary for belonging.

And, community matters because it helps us be ourselves, as Malidoma Patrice Somé shared in our reading. In community, we connect with the power within ourselves that is individual to each of us and is realized in relationship with others.

A community can be intentional about creating those conditions that invite people to be exactly who they are and not to change who they are as a precursor of belonging to the community.

Now, in this community, we don't shy away from personal change and transformation. On the contrary, the spiritual journey often involves change. What is key is that a community makes it clear that the essence of who someone is, their individualism, is welcome, affirmed, and accepted. And, each individual has agency to show up as their authentic self.

Here at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier, we embed in our mission statement the declaration that, "we welcome all." And we mean that - all across age, gender, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic or national identity, economic class, employment or housing status, theological belief or non belief, who you voted for or what party you belong to, whether you use a wheelchair or walker, whether you prefer coffee or tea.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology moves us to offer this wide welcome. You are welcome to show up here as you are - not to try to fit in, but to be exactly who you are.

Belonging should not depend on sameness. Shared experiences and identities can be the basis for belonging, but it's not the only foundation.

The Irish writer and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama says, "Sometimes belonging is created by people who have been through a similar experience and it's a very powerful experience. But belonging can also be practiced together in a positive way, by people who have very little in common. How can we find a way where people who have very little in common can also belong with each other?"

He continues, "...I'm interested in ways [in] which difference and unsameness can be seen like an invitation, rather than a threat, because otherwise all kinds of sectarianism can begin. Cecilia Clegg and Joe Liechty put together a book called

Moving Beyond Sectarianism, and they define sectarianism as “belonging gone bad.” And I love how they define that because it recognizes that belonging is a really powerful force, but even something so powerful can turn rotten, when it necessarily requires an enemy, because then it will look for an enemy, and if there isn't an enemy to be found, it will create an enemy. And so suddenly, even small differences become the reason why a certain form of belonging is based on the marginalization of others.”¹

What Ó Tuama is lifting up here is so important. As warm and fuzzy and necessary as belonging is, it also has a shadow side in which belonging based on sameness requires an enemy.

When we have enemies, we push those enemies away. We demonize those enemies. We create systems in which those enemies are excluded and disempowered.

This kind of sectarianism can crop up anywhere and is present in far too many places within our own borders and beyond. Within political communities, educational institutions, the media, and yes, religious communities, too.

I love the question that Ó Tuama poses, how can difference and unsameness be an invitation rather than a threat?

As we re-weave the bonds of community within our own congregation, I believe this is a crucial question. How might our differences, and not our sameness, offer an invitation into belonging?

I invite you to hold this question with me in the weeks and months ahead.

As you find yourself rekindling old friendship and also making new ones with others in the congregation, can you allow a difference - in age or upbringing, in musical taste or political persuasion - to be the point of entry for connection?

¹ Finding Uncommon Ground, for the wild, episode 241, July 7, 2021. <https://forthewild.world/listen/padraig-o-tuama-on-finding-uncommon-ground-encore-241#>

If you join one of our Chalice Circles this fall, can you notice and be curious about differences in your group?

On this path of belonging, may we find ways to bravely let ourselves be known for who we truly are and, in turn, receive one another with curiosity, compassion, and grace.

So may it be.