

Friend? Acquaintance? Colleague?
Sunday, October 8, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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A couple weeks ago at a UU Transitional Ministers meeting one of my colleagues said that she had been taught that people join a church for three reasons; to deepen their spirituality, to do good, and to make friends. She then said that as much as she as a minister would like it if people joined to deepen their spirituality or to do good, she thought most people joined for the third reason, to make friends. Then she or someone else said that that was not a bad thing. It was a starting place.

That same week I came across a quote I had copied out years ago from Jonathan Haidt's book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. It was actually a section in which Haidt shares information from another book. He writes, "In their book American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell analyzed a variety of data sources to describe how religious and nonreligious Americans differ. Common sense would tell you that the more time and money people give to their religious groups, the less they have left over for everything else. But common sense turns out to be wrong. Putnam and Campbell found that the more frequently people attend religious services the more generous and charitable they become across the board. Of course, religious people give a lot to religious charities, but they also give as much or more than secular folk to secular charities such as the American Cancer Society. They spend a lot of time in service to their churches and synagogues, but they also spend more time than secular folk serving in neighborhood and civic associations of all sorts. Putnam and Campbell put their findings bluntly: 'By many different measures religiously observant Americans are better neighbors and better citizens than secular Americans-they are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life.'

"Why are religious people better neighbors and citizens? To find out, Putnam and Campbell included on one of their surveys a long list of questions about religious beliefs (e.g., Do you believe in hell? Do you believe that we will be called before God to answer for our sins?) as well as questions about religious practices (e.g., How often do read holy scriptures? How often do you pray?). These beliefs and practices turned out to matter very little. Whether you believe in hell, whether you pray daily, whether you are a Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or Mormon...none of these things correlated with generosity. The only thing that was reliably and powerfully associated with the moral benefits of religion was how enmeshed people were in relationships with their co-religionists. It's the friendships and group activities carried out within a moral matrix that emphasizes selflessness. That's what brings out the best in people."

So according to the research my colleague was right that making friends can lead to doing good. I expect that that is also so for deepening one's spirituality. I can meditate by myself, but I find doing it with others is often a richer, deeper experience. I can set up an altar alone in my house, but if I set up an altar with others, sharing about why I placed something there, listening to others share about why they have added what they did, I can expand my spiritual consciousness in ways that I cannot alone.

At a recent new member orientation someone shared that they were looking for a community that shared their values. The covenant of UUCLC begins, "Love is the spirit of this church and through service we live our principles." The mission statement of TriUU is "We unite in religious community to seek spiritual growth, live with integrity, and serve with compassion." If you are looking for friends here, you are also likely to find people who will reinforce your generosity and service. But I think we tend to look for that in friends anywhere. I have heard several of you say that you have a friend who belongs to a different political party than you or who is active in their evangelical Christian church, but both of you share some common values. You both think book bans are wrong. You both believe in civil rights for people who identify as lgbtq+. You both want to do what you can to respond to climate change. Whether you found your friends here or elsewhere you are likely to share some common values.

Joining a religious congregation can be one way to find friends. The video we saw earlier in the service is listed on youtube as "Meet the woman on a mission to spread friendship in all 50 states." Shari Leid doesn't say that her Fifty States Project is about making friends. She just says that her purpose is to "sit down with 1 woman in each state to have meaningful conversations and to learn more about each woman, her family and community." That may or may not turn into a friendship, but taking time to have such conversations is though how we develop friends, how we learn about another person and what they value.

I titled this sermon Friend? Acquaintance? Colleague? Would I call the other UU ministers I know friends? I often don't know much about their family life or about what they did before ministry. Most of them I wouldn't call up to ask if they wanted to go with me to a movie. But, my colleagues are exactly the people I would call if I was struggling with an issue in one of your congregations. I would definitely ask them for help. And I certainly hope that as UU ministers we share common values. So perhaps I would call my colleagues work friends.

Even acquaintances may sometimes act as a friend. Because I wanted to have some interactions with people outside of the congregations, I have joined organizations like the American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters. I never get to League meetings, because they are on a Monday morning right before my noon Munch with the Minister session. But, I do often volunteer to take a shift staffing voter registration drives. I always make a paper nametag since I have never been to a meeting to order an official plastic one. Recently, someone I am often with on a voter registration shift ordered me a nametag and called me to ask for my address to mail it to me. I gave her my address and asked how to pay her for it. She told me it was her gift to me. An acquaintance friend?

I don't have the kind of best friend relationships that I had in my childhood when I would see someone every day and have time at recess and lunch to play and talk. But I still have people who care about me and whom I care about. I think about so many people over the years. There was the next-door neighbor who took a huge splinter out of my hand after I got it washing the windows in an old, old parsonage. There was the man at the Newport News congregation who always greeted me and asked about my family and my North Carolina congregation. There were my parents' church friends who called and brought food and visited as we sat in the hospital after my father's heart attack. There was the member of my Bowie, Maryland congregation who stepped up to do the Sunday service so that I could go and be with the family when my father had that heart attack.

I expect many of you care about me, and I about you, even though I know that when I leave, I will not be in communication with you as you develop a relationship with your next minister.

Friends, acquaintances, colleagues. They all have been and are important in my life. I think of them all fondly. So many of them now are gone. Just recently I saw in a communication from the Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice that Pat Karlsen, who had been the co-chair of the board for many of the years I worked there had died. She had cerebral palsy. She was the one who told me to say when asking people to rise for a hymn, “Stand as you are comfortable,” not as you are able. She said she was capable of standing through a hymn, but it was not comfortable. I used to play online Scrabble with her. So, we worked together. She gave me advice. We played together. Was she an acquaintance, a colleague, a friend? Does it matter what I call her? She was someone who had an important place in my life at a certain time, and that, I think, is enough.

Sometimes we can’t even be our own friend without the help of a friend. Unitarian Universalist Kat Lieu says, “One day..., after I'd gotten myself into a serious jam that required a friend to help me out, my inner critic could no longer be contained. I let loose an unrelenting stream of self-reprobatation, ignoring Shelley's (my friend's) repeated attempts to assure me things would be okay.

“Finally, she yelled, “STOP BEATING UP MY FRIEND!”

“Taken aback, I stopped. Then the words sank in and I laughed. Her uncharacteristic outburst and choice of words allowed me to see what I otherwise could not. I saw myself not as myself but as Shelley's friend — someone loved by someone else — and realized that I was being harsher on myself than I ever would be on a friend. If a friend were in my situation, I would have genuinely seen their failings as human and focused instead on how to make things better. So why hold someone to an unforgiving standard just because that someone is me?” A friend can help us be our own friend.

Do you remember that quote from Robert Putnam and David Campbell that I shared at the beginning of this sermon about what made people who attend a religious congregation more giving.

“The only thing that was reliably and powerfully associated with the moral benefits of religion was how enmeshed people were in relationships with their co-religionists. It’s the friendships and group activities carried out within a moral matrix that emphasizes selflessness. That’s what brings out the best in people.” Perhaps it because we have friends who give so freely to us that we ourselves are able to give.

Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coots wrote a Thanksgiving prayer for the harvest of people in our lives.

“Let us give thanks for a bounty of people:

“For children who are our second planting,
and though they grow like weeds
and the wind too soon blows them away,
may they forgive us our cultivation
and remember fondly where their roots are.

“Let us give thanks:

For generous friends . . . with hearts as big as hubbards
and smiles as bright as their blossoms,
For feisty friends, as tart as apples,

For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers,
keep reminding us that we've had them.

“For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible,
For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants
and as elegant as a row of corn;
And the others, as plain as potatoes and as good for you,
For funny friends, who are as silly as Brussels sprouts
and as amusing as Jerusalem artichokes,
And serious friends, as complex as cauliflowers
and as intricate as onions.

“For friends as unpretentious as cabbages,
As subtle as summer squash,
As persistent as parsley,
As delightful as dill,
As endless as zucchini,
And who, like parsnips,
can be counted on to see you through the winter.

“ For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time
And young friends coming on as fast as radishes,
For loving friends, who wind around us
like tendrils and hold us,
despite our blights, wilts and witherings,

“And, finally, for those friends now gone,
like gardens past that have been harvested,
but who fed us in their times that we might have life thereafter.
For all these, we give thanks.”

Call a person, your friend. Call a person, your colleague. Call a person, an acquaintance. If for some bit of time in your life they cared about you and you about them, what does the name matter? Give thanks for them all.