

Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Homily, September 7, 2008
Rev. Jennifer Ryu, Co-minister

This is a familiar season for those of us who have been part of Unitarian Universalists congregation for a while.

For many, Water Communion Sunday is more meaningful than Christmas or Easter.

It's a time of beginning and a time of return.
It's also a time to ask once again,
what are we coming back to--
and why do we return to this community—to this well?

We return to the well because we know that we cannot grow in isolation.

We return to the well because we choose to experience life as a member of the human family.

We return to the well because we know there is power in the joining our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

We return because we choose love over isolation.

I just finished a book by Donald Miller, a younger generation Christian writer. This 33 year old fits the profile of a typical UU—

he is a self-professed Green Liberal,

he has a strong social justice calling,

he dislikes the way some evangelical Christians claim that their way is the only way, and, for much of his life, he believed that spirituality is a solitary endeavor—something that one did quietly, by himself. This is an attitude shared by lots of Unitarian Universalists.

There are about 650,000 Americans who identify as being UU.

But only one-third of them actually belong to a congregation.

This reveals a strong independent, individualistic streak.

I often run into people who say they believe in the 7 UU principles and agree wholeheartedly with the idea that there are many paths to the Holy.

But they see no reason to join a congregation. They are perfectly content with their values and beliefs. When they need inspiration, they seek it in books and podcasts, or in nature.

Don Miller felt the same way about his Christian faith. He felt that it was something he could do by himself, which suited him fine, since he is an introvert—almost a recluse.

After spending years exploring his spirituality in the solitude of his own mind, he realized that he was lonely. Lonely, is to the soul what thirsty is to the body.

He wasn't just lonely, though, his spiritual life had grown cold—he had grown bored with Christian spirituality. He even visited a UU church a few times.

The whole idea of seeking spiritual growth in isolation is almost a contradiction in terms. Spirituality is concerned with what lies beyond our own ego.

It involves relationships with other people and an awakening to our true nature—that is, our deep self.

The deep self, the soul, if you like, or the divine light in each person makes up the Whole, the One. Some would call it God; some would call it Love. Whatever the language, it is a urging of the heart toward union instead of separation, relationship instead of isolation.

Seeking spiritual growth in isolation doesn't work
It is impossible for humans being to see themselves fully.

You can't see the middle of your back
or the back of your head--
unless you're an exceptionally flexible person.

We need other people to be the mirror that reveals those parts of ourselves that we cannot see.

And I'm not talking about the tag that's hanging out of your shirt, or the cowlick on the back of your head that's sticking up.

In the spiritual realm the things we cannot see, the deepest, most hidden parts of ourselves are often the most important.

It's hard to even imagine seeing those hidden parts reflected back to us
This idea of waking up to ourselves may feel a little too good to be true.
As the poet says, "we have only begun to imagine the fullness of life." (Levertov)

After Don Miller realized how lonely and spiritually dry he was feeling, he joined a church. But he went one step further and moved into a house with 5 other guys—all Christians from his congregation. Living with them pushed all his buttons. He was constantly angry, cranky, irritated and frustrated.

His housemates responded with loving confrontation.
They held up the mirror, and Don finally saw himself as they saw him.
For the first time in his life he realized that he was addicted to himself. He said that his mind was like a radio tuned to one station—"KDON, all Don, all the time!" (Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality by Donald Miller, 2003)

We need other people to love us this much—
to love us enough to be with us even when we're obnoxious--
to see us deeply and know that obnoxious is not who we really are.

Take a look around you.

If you were one of the fifty people who were here on Friday night for the Faith Development StartUP, you know there are people here who will love you like that.

If you were one of the 50 people who were in Covenant Groups last year, you know there are people here who will love you like that.

We return to the well because we know that we cannot grow in isolation.

We return to the well because we know there is power in the joining our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

We return because we choose love.

May it always be so.

Amen.