

BOWLING ALONE
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 7, 2002

CALL TO WORSHIP

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can plan bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more. (Marge Piercy, in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 476)

READINGS

The moving finger of God in human history points ever in the same direction. There must be community. (Rev. Howard Thurman, In *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 471)

Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Somewhere where we can be free. (Starhawk, in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 471)

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently,

without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century. (*Putnam*, 27)

SERMON

Robert Putnam is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. After many years of publishing academic books and articles unnoticed by the general public, he wrote *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (Published in 2000.) Suddenly he was “invited to Camp David, lionized by talk-show hosts, and (the secular equivalent of canonization in contemporary America) pictured with [his] wife, Rosemary, on the pages of *People*.” (506) He was on to something.

Early in the book, Putnam tells of two men, John Lambert, a 63-year-old African American retired hospital worker and Andy Boschma, a 33-year-old Euro-American accountant. The two men bowled together in a league at their local alley, the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert had been on the waiting list for a kidney transplant for three years, a fact Boschma learned of casually in the course of their weekly shared bowling endeavor. Boschma, operating out of the bond of their bowling-community kinship—their lives shared no other points of contact—offered to donate one of his own kidneys, and did so. When Lambert was recovering in the hospital, the younger man said to him, “John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn’t hesitate to do this all over again.” John, for his part, said, “I obviously feel a kinship [with Andy]. I cared about him before, but now I’m really rooting for him.” That they bowled together made all the difference, transcending the ordinary, often formidable, barriers of generation, profession and race. (28)

Unfortunately, such stories are less and less typical of our world, as we heard in the reading from Putnam’s book. “...we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.” (27) More and more of us are bowling alone.

We who are about the audacious business of building community are bucking a very strong trend. We who honor community and understand that it is worth effort on our part are diverging from the strong trend of the final third of the 20th century.

And yet, there are few things we could be doing that are more important: for ourselves as growing individuals, for the strength and health of our families and other intimate relationships, for our larger community, and for the world.

Putnam makes a very strong case for the importance of community. He speaks of the “generalized reciprocity” that occurs when community ties are strong. (134-147) In the atmosphere of trust, trustworthiness, honesty and mutual support created by ties that truly bind, people do things for each other that they would not do without those ties. Not because they expect an exact, specific return on their generosity (I’m pretty sure that Andy Boschma does not expect ever to need a kidney transplant, certainly not from John Lambert) but because they know the community will step up when they have a need. One Volunteer Fire Department advertised its fund-raising pancake breakfast with the slogan, “Come to our breakfast and we’ll come to your fire”—their little joke being of course being that they will come to your fire whether you buy their pancakes or not. As

Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.” (Putnam, 21, 20)

I find the concept of “generalized reciprocity” compelling, and am entirely convinced that the world needs more of it.

However, there are more religious ways, of speaking about community and its deep, deep value to the human spirit. (Putnam, by the way, points to religious communities as uniquely important in American civil society. He also notes that people of faith—those who belong to a faith *community*—are far more civically active, far more generous with time, money and energy in the larger community than are non-“churched” people. [65-79])

When we belong to a community—when we are rooted in a group whose good we sometimes put above our individual good—we become healed, over and over, from the fractures and brokenness that human living brings. When we are healed—over and over—we become more whole. (Knowing that “heal” and “whole” and “holy” share a common root.) When we are more whole, we are more generous, more tolerant, more accepting, more embracing, more honest with ourselves and others. The wholeness evoked and demanded by the bonds of community pull us toward our best selves. If we, in our frail human way, are ever striving toward our highest selves, we will live in such a way that makes love more likely to flourish.

From the bonding of our strong, luminous communities—from the shining hearts made possible by the trust and trustworthiness of our shared homes—we go forth to create bridges among disparate people and groups of the world

What did Starhawk say, in her moving words about community? A place where there are “arms to hold us when we falter.” I recently spoke with someone who had not-so-long-ago made some choices that ended up hurting several people, some of them in this community.

Think for a moment of a time when you have made such a choice, affecting any of the communities of your life. Facing such choices can be excruciating, because one expects—realistically, in much of society—that one will be judged harshly for such choices. And, indeed, a true community holds us accountable. Thinking of your own private unwise choice now, reflect upon whether your community embodied the process of loving accountability: asking us to examine what caused us to make the choice; asking us to ponder upon what atonement(s) need to be made; asking us to make them; asking us to create paths where such choices will not be made again.

And forgiving us. We are gathered back to the community’s collective spirit and to its individual hearts, because those who happen not to have made that particular bad choice at that time know that they could have. Know they have made other, different, unwise and harmful choices. Know that we are all human.

The person with whom I was speaking was grateful beyond words that the examination-atonement-forgiveness process was well on its way, grateful for the gift of honest love and ultimate acceptance.

Starhawk also rejoices in “a circle of hands [that] will open to receive us, eyes [that] will light up as we enter, voices [that] will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.” In this church, we offer covenant groups, and Fireside Chats, and spiritual-growth groups like Evensong, and issues-oriented classes like Bible and Homosexuality, and academic classes like Existentialism, and worship experiences like

Sunday morning and Winter Solstice and meditation—we share in these various endeavors of body, mind and spirit to help each other “come into our own power.” We give of ourselves to make such experiences possible, that we may live more happily and more lovingly and more creatively and more constructively.

At least as importantly as what we do for our adult selves, we take the body-mind-spirit empowerment of our children very seriously. We are beset by questions: What do we say to our kids who are worried about how to reply to their religiously-certain classmates? How do we help our children learn about sexuality and relationship and appropriateness? What does it take to set a child’s feet confidently on the road to love and justice-making? It takes a lot—and this liberal religious community, with its dedicated religious educators and parents and caring non-parents, makes a significant contribution.

In a religious community such as this, the generations weep together when souls depart from us—how we miss Vi and Catherine and Jim and Donna and Frances and Bob and Su and Wilma and Vince and Jim and.... We learn together that life is short; we learn how incredibly dear are our loving connections, how quickly they can be gone.

We laugh together over the generations. I love it when the kids have spontaneous, unrehearsed and unself-conscious wisdom to offer, like the child who said Jesus “got loose” from under that stone. I love it when anyone, of anyone age, makes us laugh. The other evening at a meeting, one of our older members was gazing at a plate of Easter cookies: rabbits and eggs and chickens. She was seeing one of them (rabbit, I believe) sort of sideways, and exclaimed approvingly to the maker, “Oh, a hippopotamus cookie!” That particular committee will cherish for a long time the Easter Hippopotamus Cookie comment.

Laughing, weeping, learning, teaching, atoning, forgiving, accepting help and offering our own services, even unto larger society—it’s what we do to become more human and more connected with the Divine. (The same thing!) In our community, in this place, we choose consciously to extend ourselves in generosity and affection, that we may create a place of “generalized reciprocity” and healing.

I love this place with a passion that surprises me sometimes. I am so grateful that my job “requires” me to do things like write this sermon, because I “have” to stop and reflect upon why I and the rest of you go to all the trouble we do. Howard Thurman says, “There must be community,” and some part of us knows that, knows that we contribute vastly to the salvation of the world by giving of ourselves to this religious body.

Speaking of giving, our annual operating budget canvass is coming right up, bringing us the joyful opportunity to embody our highest and deepest values through stewardship—allocating resources for the care and maintenance of this precious UU community, this pearl of great price in Southwest Idaho.

I am greatly indebted to Greg Duffy, this morning’s service coordinator, for preaching to me the glorious reasons that lie behind a generous, enthusiastic, large-spirited participation in this church’s support. It goes like this, in the minds of each of us religiously-bowling-together folks.

- 1) Boise is the greatest place to live on this planet, which is why I am here, why we are here.

- 2) BUUF is the greatest religious community anywhere, and I love being here, for myself and my kids and for the effect it has on us that makes us work to create a better world.
- 3) Because of 1) and 2), I'm excited about giving my absolute best to this Fellowship, monetarily and otherwise, and it will make me feel terrific to do so. (I probably can't give what I'd really like to, but I sure will give what I can!)

By this time, Greg has reminded me how I feel (not to mention helping me rev up to talk about the awesome wonders of community, ours in particular), and I have my pen poised over my pledge form.

But wait! says Greg. If my family is going to make an informed pledge, we need just a bit more information: primarily, that our thriving, dynamic, holy and very human religious institution needs a 17% increase from last year's budget, if we are going to do the "bare bones" improvements—a 20% increase will make a whole bunch of great stuff possible.

For instance, Greg says—in case my math skills are a little rusty, given all my years of living intimately with the liberal arts—“Just take the example of a family giving \$100 a week. A 20% increase for them would make their pledge \$120 a week. Whatever your amount, the 20% increase is really easy to figure....”

So, filled with passion as a result of Greg's enthusiasm for our best-of-all-possible communities (not to mention impressed by his formidable canvassing abilities), I go into a quick huddle with my husband Bob. “OK. We're going to Spain to learn Spanish this summer, that's a big expense—the dues we pay to the synagogue are going up—umm... This congregation is such an important part of our lives and such a vital voice in our Valley... ummm... mutter... mutter...” Coming to a swift decision, we say, “Although we'd love to give more, for this year, we'll increase our pledge to the operating budget by 17%, bringing our pledge to 5% of our gross family income. If we possibly can, we will donate \$1000 to the capital fund, hoping for better religious education fixtures and a more beautiful environment.”

And we do feel good (even knowing we'd like to do more), because it is so important to us.

Unitarian Universalists have often been in the forefront of social change, and we can be now. We can be in the vanguard, loud, harmonious voices singing the value of bowling together. Sure, it requires a certain generosity and “giving up” of our individuality—it takes a lot longer to bowl a game, and we have to wait our turn, some of our team members aren't all that skilled, and sometimes we even have to buy the beer.

But think of it. We will probably not receive an organ transplant (although we may!), but how we rejoice to be with “people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. ...strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.” (*We* may be the not-so-skilled ones, sometimes.)

How we rejoice to be fully human with others, honest and trusting and trustworthy. What a gift, a boon, a blessing beyond description, are the ties that bind us in community: triumphant, sinning, generous of spirit, forgiving, questing, hoping, grieving, celebrating, stumbling. Picked up. How worthy it is, to contribute to a place

that calls us to be our best, and to create more love in this world. How comforting to know that if I go to your funeral, you will go to mine.

it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

Sources consulted

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