

Center for Courage and Renewal Habits of the Hearts Series  
Habit One: We're All in This Together  
A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist  
September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Last week we began to explore the importance of covenant in Unitarian Universalism. It was an exploration that enabled us to begin to see that, when deep covenants are made, they always include that dimension beyond measurement – the dimension of spirit, of shared faithfulness to a way of being, and to one another. They're strong and enduring. In the movie *Mary Poppins*, Jane and Michael have had an amazing day with their nanny and, as she tucks them into bed, Jane says: you won't ever leave us, will you? Michael chimes in, "Will you stay if we promise to be good?" Mary Poppins responds by saying "Oh! That's a piecrust promise. Easily made, easily broken." When we say our covenant each week, it should be something we encounter in all sincerity and say with awareness – it should challenge us. After all, we're reaffirming the principles written into it. And the first thing it says – is "we unite to strengthen the bonds of kinship among all persons."

That pretty closely resembles the first habit of the heart – the recognition that we are all in this together. It's easy to look around our society and our world and get the impression that – maybe it really is every one for themselves – maybe we aren't really all in this together – maybe the best course is to each stake out our own castle, moat, and drawbridge and hunker down to survive the coming zombie apocalypse.

Well – we've been trying that for a while – and it hasn't been working out all that well. In 1985 Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton published a broad study of American Society. The title was *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, and it examined attitudes toward civic involvement and explored the explosive growth of self-improvement movements. In 1985, I was living in Atlanta and had just gotten a license for massage therapy. I'd come from Pittsburgh, which still had, at the time, its character as a working class city, with strong ethnic neighborhoods and genuinely warm people, and neighborhood hardware stores. Atlanta was a different story. It was a city of extremes. South of Interstate 20 the black community, for the most part, struggled to thrive. North of the city was a sprawling, growing white middle class, focused on getting ahead. Despite the mythical laid back southern culture, Atlanta was fast: drivers were aggressive, traffic was heavy, and there was a pervasive sense of restlessness. You could easily find the latest trends in fast cars, fashion, or food – but you had to travel a distance to find a good hardware store. The atmosphere of self-absorbed go-getterism was thick.

Everyone seemed to be looking for the magic formula for their version of success. On one hand – the success of affluence – on another – blue green algae, spiritual success, or self-improvement. Atlanta was a buffet where you could fill your plate with Louise Hay reminding you to create your own reality, trance channelers who could tell you things you already knew but were afraid to claim, take an intensive journal workshop, or find your power animal on a shamanic Journey. Now, I don't condemn these things but I look at them through a larger lens.

There was a tide of folks searching for the magic formula for enlightenment, perfect relaxation, and total control of reality. It was a different branch of self-absorption – but grown from the same tree. Bellah and company said of this individualism “We found that it took both a "hard" utilitarian shape and a "soft" expressive form. One focused on the bottom line, the other on feelings... often ... viewed therapeutically.”

Of course, this picture of Atlanta is a caricature – but, still, it was a city deeply invested in the self-absorption of its people.

What the researchers found was that, those were precisely the poles of American culture toward which people had gravitated. Personal wealth and or personal growth.

They also found that, what with all this focus on self, in personal crisis, people had few other people to turn to -- they felt alone and cast upon their own resources. Bellah looked back to Alexis De Tocqueville, who spoke of our many voluntary organizations, religious gatherings, our eagerness to engage in local politics. They wrote: “Tocqueville described the mores-which he on occasion called "habits of the heart " ... and showed how they helped to form American character... helping to create the kind of person who could sustain a connection to a wider political community and thus ultimately support the maintenance of free institutions. He also warned that some aspects of our character-what he was one of the first to call "individualism"-might eventually isolate Americans one from another and ... undermine the conditions of freedom.”

What Bellah’s researchers found, was that deTocqueville’s anxiety had come to pass. The fabric of American society was fraying. In 2001 Robert Putnam, another social researcher, wrote *Bowling Alone* and it appeared, by then, that the unraveling was worse. It was getting harder to find bowling teams – informal but regular social groupings – the voluntary groups that had made our towns and cities, our neighborhoods, strong and healthy – these groups were weakening. They were sustained, most often by the members of the great generation – the men and women who had endured both the great depression and second world war and had built up our civic life, and had strengthened our grasp on the participatory life of American, democratic citizenship and given us our sense of mutual connection, of living in a community and larger society in which we would not be allowed to fall through the cracks nor allow others to. Putnam wrote: “Networks involve...Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity; 'I'll do this for you now, in expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor.” It’s what Putnam and others call “social capital.”

Optimistically, he also wrote: "Churches provide an important incubator for civic skills, norms, interests, and recruitment. Religiously active men and women learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility. They also befriend others who are in turn likely to recruit them into other forms of community activity. In part for these reasons, churchgoers are substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways, and to have deeper informal social connections... religiously involved people seem simply to know more people...These studies cannot show conclusively that churchgoing itself 'produces' social connectivity-probably the causal arrow between the two points in both directions-but it is clear that religious people are unusually active social capitalists."

By the time the new edition of *Habits of the Heart* came out in 2007, we were in deeper trouble. There was a growing distrust of all organizations – civic, political, and it had spread to communities of faith as well. Sometimes faith communities cause distrust

– the child abuse cover up by the catholic church -- scandals involving evangelical preachers, the use of divisive social issues over building beloved communities – you get the idea. Fundamental trust had broken down even in faith communities.

Overall, our society and world may show signs that we are not in it together. But whether we like it or not, whether flat earth biblical literalists believe in it or not – we are – for better and worse – in it together. The scientific evidence abounds, and it's fairly clear with a chance of doom – whether or not Chief Seattle really said it – “all things are connected. We did not weave the web of life – we are merely a strand in it and whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.”

We may feel small and nearly insignificant – but our collective footprint is huge. It reminds me of the time, recorded in a profound tome, that a bear and piglet walked in circles around a spinney of trees in the thousand acre wood following the tracks of a Woozle in the snow. Around and around they went trying to catch up with the fearsome beast but the more they walked the more tracks there were. They were terrified that a horrifying creature might catch up with them or they with the creature, until at last, Christopher Robin explained that they'd been circling the trees themselves, adding more and more tracks to their own original footprints. So we walk around and around our tree of life – seeing something genuinely frightening – and it turns out to be our own missteps. We're in this together.

We are in this together from the moment of birth, when we emerge helpless. We know it in our bones. If we're lucky – that interdependence is reflected in a grown up face that smiles as we explore in childhood, in kind and safe touches, physical nourishment, lessons of language, and social competence. If we're not lucky, we carry wounds and scars that make for hard work later in life.

It is our nature to be in this together and to know it – somewhere in the back of our minds – in spite of what we might be told or sold – or even believe consciously. And, I think that we yearn to feel that deep sense of connection and belonging reawaken. Unconnected, we are really only partly alive – connected we are whole. We are like aspen trees – who have mistakenly thought that since we look like many trees that is the truth – but under the ground, our root system is one – we are fully alive when we are connected because we are, we were always, part of one another.

It might be scary, particularly if your moat and castle are well stocked and you're sure that you'll be fine when the zombie apocalypse arrives -- but still, I believe that – whatever assembly we come to: mosque, gurdjwara, synagogue, church, forest, prairie, or congregation – we are following a deep drive to reweave the larger web of belonging – to reclaim all that we have lost – in our hearts and our world.

Maybe you weren't thinking that when you got ready to come here this morning – maybe you wanted a small dose of social connection or a bit of spirituality – Parker Palmer wrote: "spirituality refers to the eternal human longing to be part of something larger than one's own ego." Whatever we're about here – it is surely to be part of something larger than one's own ego. But, we are trying, to one degree or another, for one hour of words and music to restructure something in ourselves that is formed and pressed by the larger world the other 167 hours.

The habit of the heart, of knowing that we are all in this together is not simply an idea – it is a living reality – one that is a challenge to live into in world structured in the way ours is. It is a reality that has to reawaken in our bones.

This is, part and parcel with the practice of the covenant that is not simply for this congregation – but the covenant with of all life – for we are deeply tied into the web of life. And we need the practice because we have trained out of these feelings of connection – of interconnection – of remembering how we belong to one another – every person, puppy, leaf, mountain, river, and growing thing. Our brains, our synapses – our reflexes cast us back on ourselves. But we can rewire our brains, we can create new synaptic connections, we can change ourselves and our world – it just takes practice.

Let's think about this for a moment –

I want to ask a couple of questions from a courage and renewal workbook.

When do you feel most aware of your interconnection to and interdependence on other people? When do you feel most disconnected?

What enables you to take the risk to open up and really experience connection -- to meet someone else heart to heart? It's true that there are times we'll walk up to someone we don't know and strike up a conversation, here, intentionally reach out to someone new to us when we share the light at the end of service, we may join a chalice circle and find new connections. But even here – we can stay in our comfort zones, sit in the same basic place week after week.

I believe that we need to move out of our comfort zones and toward one another. I believe that it will make us stronger as a community of faith and covenant.

Last week I used this slide from the work of the Reverend Renee Ruchotzke. So I want to challenge you right now. Look around and pick up any belongings you brought in with you. Now, without speaking, just looking around, I want you to get up and move to another seat in another row. Don't look for a friend. Now – you don't have to move if you aren't able to physically, or if you are just too uneasy – or maybe you are new here, or maybe this just isn't the right moment – but I want to encourage you to, quietly and wordlessly, move to another seat in another row. I am going to be talking while you are moving. This may feel awkward perhaps a little scary. Moving through the synaptic gap. In the space of uncertainty and movement change and new connection among us can happen. In that space we can learn to open up to one another and our world again – learn to greet strangers on the street – learn to see our private and public lives differently. In the moment of discomfort – something new can happen – beside the discomfort. It's the moment when old habits begin to loosen their grasp and we can reach for a new habit. The idea of this connection is easy for Unitarian Universalists – it's in our seventh principle – the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. But we are trying to get out of the idea and into the deep knowledge – into the place where our hearts and lives are changed by it.

Now that you are in a new seat – look around. Around you are people who just took the same risk you did -- who awoke this morning and, instead of staying in bed and hiding from the world – came into it and came here.

They have a world of experience to share and a world of ideas – they have things to teach and things to learn. They bring you the comfort of companionship – but also the challenge of a new voice – a voice you need to hear. You can meet one another and in the space between you new worlds are possible – if you are willing to lower the drawbridge and step out. In the space between you, ideas collide and new ideas are formed. In the space between you there is arriving and welcome. There is an affirmation of your wholeness – and a rediscovery of your wholeness. Of the place in

you that knows that we – the largest we you can imagine – beginning here and moving out into the world – we are in it – this life, this world – together.

Remembering this deeply will take practice. So as you move through your week – when you meet friends – you might take a deep breath to clear your mind and think -- we are all in this together. And when you are waiting in traffic you might take a deep breath and think -- we are all in this together. And when you are picking up groceries you might take a deep breath and think -- we are all in this together. And when you are looking into the face of a stranger on the train you might take a deep breath -- we are all in this together. And when you return here next week take a new seat, by a new person and take a deep breath and think -- we are all in this together. It's a technique though Parker Palmer says "At the deepest levels of human life, we do not need techniques. We need insights into ourselves and the world that can help us understand how to learn and grow from our experiences of diversity, tension, and conflict." Still let us practice beyond technique to the work of reaffirming covenant.

As you look around at the new people beside you – perhaps somewhere you might begin to know that you are hands on the same body—you are partners in the greatest project – the project of the life of the world. The project of holding, creating, sustaining, healing life, generating love, bringing compassion and fairness – there is no other project and there are no greater partners. We are greater than we could ever have imagined on our own. And we are all in this together.