

Habit Five: The Capacity to Create Community
Center for Courage and Renewal Habits of the Hearts Series
A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
On November 10, 2013
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Just around the corner from us is Lincoln Elementary School and the sports field next to the school is a hangout for a flock of geese. Now, I know that some of you aren't terribly fond of geese – they leave a mess – though I suspect, all things considered, they think the same of us. Myself, I'm fond of them – they look so bright and alert. I think about how I heard that they mate for life; when I see one alone I worry that there's a grieving goose. There's a house on Rohlwing that, annually, hosts four geese, the field by Lincoln School has between 14 to 20. They were clustered in their herd about a week ago and I pulled over to watch them for a bit. I sat grinning, watching them root for something to munch and generally mill around and I realized that part of the deep pleasure I felt was related to seeing a group of connected souls, a flock, a herd, a community.

The street, the school, my car – were all interfering with their migration pattern, but the geese were steadfast. There's a beauty and mystery in seeing a community that is committed – whether the members are geese, cranes, elephants, or people. Like the steadfastness of geese, it takes capacity and tenacity to create and sustain community.

Community is a word that gets bandied about a fair amount – sometimes it just means proximity – where you live. But often it means something deeper – being truly connected more than by proximity -- by compassion and concrete care.

Our niece in law Rosa lives on San Juan Island, in Washington State. She's the produce manager at the local co-op and an arborist. She and our nephew Grisha have been building a straw bale house themselves, for about two and a half years. Throughout the warm season or when it's relatively dry, Rosa posts on the Co-op wall, on face book and through the Island grapevine, requests for help on their house. Not paid help – just any help. Volunteers with a few hours to dig holes, move dirt, heft bales, smear plaster. Some who come are old friends. Some are folks that they've helped in the past on their own projects; some are simple barterers for tree work, music lessons, help with the harvest. Some are just curious folks with some time and a desire to be of service, and have become dear friends. We visited last summer and drove over to a friend's house where the family was renovating and getting rid of a perfectly serviceable shower stall.

And we went into Friday Harbor for the annual fourth of July parade. It was like you might expect – quirky, warm, full of hellos, quick hugs, and broad smiles.

Some years ago on an episode of A Prairie Home Companion, Garrison Keillor said something about Lake Wobegon being a friendly place because you could always count on someone to stop and help you with a jump start or tire chains if you were stuck in the snow. That's a lifesaver in a Minnesota winter for sure.

Anyway, back on the island, as we were watching the fourth of July parade we heard shouts. It turned out that just about 20 feet from us a girl of about ten years old tripped and fell and right behind her was a massive old classic car, whose

brakes just happened to fail right then. So, as the driver was unable to stop, the car, moving at a slow parade speed, hit the girl and dragged her underneath. In the split seconds that this was happening, a surge of onlookers from the side of the street rushed forward and, wasting not a moment, heaved together and tipped the car up and got the girl out. She was only mildly injured – a broken ankle and scrapes – but the entire community had rushed to her help and everyone large and small, young and old had seen with crystal clarity their commitment to one another.

Most of us are used to something very different. Sure, we're more likely to trust and help one another in small towns or enclaves – like ethnic pockets in New York or in Pittsburgh, where I grew up. Sometimes we feel lucky to move into a neighborhood where we won't have our bumper stickers judged by our neighbors, or as one man told me recently, to have the neighbors show up in a hostile delegation to read you the riot act about lighting a Chanukah Menorah along with your Christmas tree. When I bought a house in Candler Park in Atlanta, the young man, who'd grown up in the house, but who'd move to the distant suburbs, came to show the house with a gun in his jacket, saying, you can't be too careful in the city.

Americans have long mourned the loss of a sense of community. Still, I suspect that such a sense of community only ever existed in pockets and for short periods of time. Most of us, here, live in American suburbs – where isolation has been given both ground and nourishment. Out here, in the landscape of the single family dwelling and unused front porch, we live in that isolation. Americans identify as though we were one nation united with liberty and justice for all – but, as far as I can tell, our national fabric is more than a bit worn and tattered. Our failure of trust is fairly well demonstrated by our now national concealed carry laws. We're armed against one another. The killing of Trayvon Martin, further shredded our sense of community. I believe it was an act of racism, but it *also* demonstrated that this nation is so on edge, that we'll shoot first, make shooting first acceptable and legal. Last Saturday, not in a hoodie, not suspiciously eating candy – but guilty of being black, Renisha McBride was stranded after a car accident in a Detroit suburb. Her phone didn't work so she went to a nearby house for help, and knocked on the door. The homeowner came to the door and fatally shot Renisha in the head without asking why she'd knocked. Michigan is another Stand Your Ground State – and therefore no arrest has been made.

I'm left asking – upon what ground can we stand together? How can we reclaim, rebuild or build perhaps for the first time, the sense of community for which we yearn – the kind of community that our ancestors read of in the new york harbor -- a place of refuge, of room to breathe, and calmer waters?

Starhawk, the activist and teacher, in *Dreaming the Dark* so (I shared part on the cover of the order of service) wrote: “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. 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. Someplace where

we can be free.” So she wrote.

And above the words, is a painting from 1928 by J.C Wyeth entitled *You Shall Have Homes*. It shows wild geese following the ancient call to a place of haven. In our hearts, I believe that we are yearning for that home, but we don’t know the flight path – or it’s been too long paved over. Through the practice of the fifth habit, we can find, make that community. But – like all habits of the heart, it will take practice.

On Youtube, I found a group of folks who, as an experiment, and calling themselves the New York Conversation Exchange, decided to pay people to walk and talk with each other – with strangers. It wasn’t much money – but it could add up. You could sit and talk for a few minutes at a time, or walk hand in hand down the street, or share a secret. It was amazing the happiness on people’s faces.

Here, in the midst of the yearning and lost world – you and I have found our way to this place and it is the perfect place to practice. In fact, a spiritual community – a community of faith is often called a community of practice – because it is a community of those drawn together to practice their faith – but the phrase *Community of Practice* has come to mean much more. Years ago I read about communities of practice referring to the profound possibilities of congregational life – when it is seen as a learning community. There’s the classic idea of religious community – you open the door and walk into a place of set patterns, finished texts, clergy with final answers, and a ritual that seldom varies from week to week and year to year – following a lectionary or prescribed set of readings. Open the door, walk in – it’s done. This pattern of religious life no longer fits our times – all the faiths are faltering and fading – but the pattern of the static congregation fits, even more poorly, those of us who have come *here*. Freethinkers, free range believers, evolutionary spirits – we’re suited by principle, history, and character to be a community of practice and learning. A community in which, bound by a covenant of truth seeking, curiosity, mutual care, care for the wide world, and a spirit of boundless love – we are suited to explore, to test, to learn, to grow, to evolve. And in our times – we know that this is not an exploration for one soul alone – but for a community of spirits – because, as the Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed said: “The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen.” He is right. We need one another because you can’t practice the skills that can shape a community or a world of peace, justice, and generosity alone.

Last week, we spoke of the power of our voices. I spoke of the music of voices together and like any music – the music of deep community – takes practice and more practice. I discovered a New York improv group that took a microphone and loudspeaker on a podium with a plaque that said: say something nice.

The capacity to create community comes first, in small ways and begins in our minds. It comes when we recognize that isolation does not serve us – because in the long run, our loneliness and failures of trust – are destructive to our lives. Then, it grows when we reach out to a friend – but much, much more, when we reach out to someone we don’t know well or don’t know at all. There’s no magic door to walk through where the work of community has been done and need never be done again. Community only exists in so far as we create it. Though you can be welcomed in the community itself is made of countless acts done daily. There is no perfect time – if you want community – the time is now.

Community is created when we share eagerly, make events accessible, when we think of those who can't be with us and figure out how to include them, or think of those who aren't with us and figure out how they might feel welcome. We practice when we see someone we don't know, introduce ourselves, reveal something about ourselves and ask about them.

I watched Peggy Graves paint Mount Rushmore in Atherton Hall, for hours, I saw the folks working on the auction and doing it all – to serve others – not because they have to but because that it is how we put our faith in action and in the meantime, they made connections with one another.

The Halloween party was a pure practice of creating community. The team that worked on it – I saw them around here for days and weeks, early and late, before hand. They brimmed over with delight, rooms rang with laughter and music. They thought up activities for every age, made door prizes for fun. They left the decorations up for a week by request -- so the visiting National Navigators conference could enjoy them. Navigators – just in case you're wondering – are an inclusive scouting group – boys, girls, theists, non-theists, open to the children of gay parents and to all children. They began in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in New York City called, appropriately, All Souls, who wanted to reach out to the local community in Harlem and share the values, fun, and experience of scouting in a seriously underserved area. Our own Elizabeth Vesto can tell you more about Navigators – here, at CCUU navigators began because many of us realized that our own kids were not welcome in Boy Scouts – and our faith was not recognized in their religion and life badge.

The capacity to create community comes when we combine the other four habits of the heart – when we take to heart our interdependence, when we value our differences – visible and invisible, when we live creatively and grow because of those differences, when we speak up not only for ourselves – but for the transforming values of our faith and recognize that all of that together challenges us to create the deep community for which all souls yearn. And then we practice.

The capacity to create community comes when we realize that we serve on committees not to serve some abstract goal – but to actually engage in the project of community and serve life here in the present. For generations Unitarian Universalists and perhaps others in other faiths – joked that our sacrament was coffee – and in a sense it is. The preparing of coffee is an act of welcome to both stranger and friend. Bringing food to a potluck is an act of love. And each act brings us more fully into community with one another. The creation of community happens afresh every week – but above all – it happens when we work together – in the very process of working together.

We have a covenant and set of principles – they give us great freedom in thought – but if we take them seriously -- they ask us to act in ways that both cultivate our hearts and strengthen our connections. If we take them seriously – to affirm the dignity worth of every person, to recognize our interdependence, to engage in the democratic process, to act with justice equity and compassion – then we are faced with the question that Parker Palmer asks in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*: “How can we create relationships among us that bring those words to life, ways of being together that are congruent with what we teach and preach?”

So he wrote. If we firmly embodied our principles, covenant, our Unitarian Universalist values – we would have the capacity to create a stunningly powerful and uplifting community and our lives and our world would be transformed.

May we make it so.