

We Are More Alike, My Friends
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reading #1: “You Are My Other Me” by Deborah Cooper
(inspired by a Mayan greeting)

Open our eyes
that we might see
our own face, reflected
in a stranger

that we might recognize
and bless
the holy light
in every soul we meet.

Grant us the bravery
to leave the foot-worn path,
to move beyond
repeated patterns

and assumptions...
to walk in the ways
of fairness
and equality.

Guide our hands
in the service of healing
and uplifting.
Teach us to listen deeply,

to speak truth out in the open
to understand that we belong
to one another...
hand-in-hand.

Help us to mend goodness,
to insist upon compassion,
to repair the damaged world
in countless, daily ways.

Give us hearts
that break easily open,
like seeds...
the possibility

of transformation.
Create in each of us
a space of consolation
and of peace.

Reading #2: “The Human Family” by Maya Angelou

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.

Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.

I’ve sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I’ve seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women
called Jane and Mary Jane,
but I’ve not seen any two
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different
although their features jibe,
and lovers think quite different thoughts
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,
we weep on England’s moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,
are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
in major we’re the same.

I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.

Sermon: “We Are More Alike, My Friend”

*By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.
By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.*

By Breath, words and music by Sara Thomsen

We are more alike, my friends.

For my last birthday my husband asked what I wanted.

I truly don't need for much of anything. But, what I wanted was a DNA test. I wanted to find out, a little more precisely, from where my ancestors came. Were they all from Poland and Belarus and somewhere down around Slovakia?

Had any ancestor ventured west of the Vistula River? Or as far east as the Volga?

Well, for the most part that was true. I'm 88% eastern European. Ah, but the rest:

3% northwestern Europe, including Scandinavia.

Then there's the 3% that's from the southeast Europe – the Balkans – Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia – Herzegovina.

And 5% called “broadly European” – including the news that I have more Neanderthal ancestry than most – an archaic human, extinct 40,000 years ago, but who share 99.7% of their DNA with homo sapiens.

Finally, there's the ½% of me that is Yakut – an aboriginal group of Turkic people who live in northern Siberia, and another ½% who started down in the Indian subcontinent.

I'm connected across the centuries and millennia, across time and space, to people from across the span of Europe to east Asia.

*The air that is my breath... is the air that you are breathing
And the air that is your breath... is the air that I am breathing
The wind rising in my breast... Is the wind... from the east, from the west
From the north... from the south... Breathing in, breathing out.*

And my journey has been like many Westerners – spending half my life finding out who I am as an individual; and the other half, discovering who are my people, what is the broader community to which I belong.

I am not saying that this is an entirely separate set of discoveries. As I'll be observing throughout this sermon, it's a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

A phrase I used a lot in my recent Worship Workshop: “On the other hand.”

I'm looking for me; I'm looking for us [the broadest and deepest *us* I can imagine.]

Life, and human nature, is like that: a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Sometimes a bundle of contradictions or seeming paradoxes.

A little like our 1st & 7th principles.

“The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Wonderful principles!

- ✚ Around the first principle we've built our Welcoming Congregation initiatives. Standing on the Side of Love. An increasing understanding of the many shadings of sexual identity and sexual orientation.
- ✚ An increasing understanding of neurodiversity – the many different ways we think & feel & proceed to action.
- ✚ We learn our Meyers-Brigg's letters; and our enneagram number; and our spirituality type.

The first principle.

- ✚ In the U.S., conscious support for our Muslim neighbors. The many immigrants to our shores. Here in Canada, a hearty welcome to immigrants on your shores.
- ✚ In the States, a focus on Black Lives Matter concerns.
- ✚ Here in Canada, Reconciliation work, especially through faith communities, with First Nations' peoples.
- ✚ In both countries, anti-bullying work.

You may have noticed that some of the work, based on our 1st principle, is geared toward individuals. But soon this principle, this works moves out into whole communities.

And we must ask ourselves:

How do we reconcile individual needs and wants, our individual beliefs and opinions, our different ways of seeing an issue with the needs and wants of a wider community?

Our seventh principle:

Respect for our inextricable interconnectedness. [E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*]

Our Green Sanctuaries. Support for environmental concerns. We learn about the impact of pipelines. Of fracking. Auto emissions. Garbage. Clean air. Clean water. Water distribution and access.

As I sang two week ago:

*The water that is my blood... my sweat, tears from crying
Is the water that is your blood... your sweat, tears from crying
And the rising of the tide... Is in our veins... and in the ocean wide
We are in the rising steam... Rushing river, running stream.*

With rising concerns about our use, misuse, overuse of the planet; concerns about basic needs going unmet in many parts of the developing world, and the 3rd world; concerns about our 1st world wants outstripping the earth's capacity – with all these concerns in mind, serious consideration has been given in Unitarian Universalist congregations about whether the 1st & 7th principles ought to be switched in order.

Whether our relationship to the larger community should take precedence over our concern for the individual.

Should our emphasis on the individual be toned down? Our emphasis on community be highlighted?

With the individual as sacrosanct, a potential danger is the individual may disrupt the community with their own wants or needs.

With the community as ranking first, the individual may feel ignored, or squelched, or voiceless.

The Lakota Sioux have a phrase, *Mitakuye oyasin*. *Mitakuye oyasin* means “all my relation.” It’s sometimes translated as “we are all related,” and it suggests the Lakota world view of our underlying connection. *Mitakuye oyasin* calls for harmony with all forms of life – fellow humans, the two-legged and four-legged, the furred and winged and finned and buzzing. Also with trees, and plants; with rocks and rivers, mountains and valleys. [See *White Buffalo Teachings*, Chief Arvol Looking Horse]

Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, speaks of his vision of the unity of all:

“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all,
And round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.
And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell
And I understood more than I saw.
For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit
And the shapes as they must live together like one being.

And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight,
And in the center grew one mighty flowering tree
To shelter all the children of one mother and one father
And I saw that it was holy.”

A unifying vision of all we are and all we do together.

*The earth is dust, the earth is clay... flow'rs blossoming and fading
We are dust and we are clay... we are blossoming and fading
Every color, every sound... Every place... is holy ground
Oh, every living thing, can you hear it laugh?... Can you hear it sing?*

By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.

Of course, many of us see this discussion about the individual and the community as not an either / or situation. Both principles are necessary to a full, flourishing life – whether one’s own unique, individual life, or one’s life within community.

In our local paper, the *Duluth News Tribune*, on the day I was writing this sermon, I read about a couple of movies. “Queen of Katwe,” based on a true story, tells of a young girl growing up in poverty in the slums of Katwe, Nigeria. The trajectory of her life will most probably be like her mother’s: little education, an early marriage and children, a husband dead of AIDS, “nothing but strife.” But young Phiona learns chess and finds she has a knack for it. She goes on to win chess competitions. Pulls herself and her family out of poverty.

A lovely story of both an individual triumph, and the impact it has on a family.

The second movie is “Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children.” Child misfits, with odd and unusual powers. [One girl must wear lead boots so she does not float off into the stratosphere.] but the children come together as a family, under the protection of the dangerous and mysterious Miss Peregrine. Their peculiar individuality is softened by their learning to live together and care for each other.

That description does remind me a bit of our congregations. Filled with unique individuals. Some of them filled with plans. Some who want to spend a lot of time in discussion, or in argument. Some who want to put emphasis on growth – in numbers of people, amounts of money. A few who would seek spiritual growth. Some who love to learn. Other who want to do something. Soup kitchens. Empty Bowls. Social justice projects. Or host informational movies or talks. Some who appreciate metaphor and ritual. Some who want nothing but the facts.

Lots of different individuals, with different needs and wants.

Their peculiar individuality softened by their learning to live together, formulate covenants – to make & keep promises to each other, care for one another.

I note the obvious differences
in the human family.
Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.

Yet, joined in one body. One faith community.

By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.

In First Corinthians [verses 12-27] we read:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with [the Church]...

If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because

I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?...

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

Some of us like to lead with our head – detailed, scientific, reasoned living. Some, with our heart – an emotional event at every turn. Some, with our hands and legs, an embodied, active, doing sort of life. Some with our spirit – filled with ritual and metaphor, meditation or prayer, mysticism and wonder.

As Corinthians puts it:

“To each is given some spiritual gift for the common good. To one is given the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge... to another gifts of healing... to another various facility with languages, to another the interpretation of language... [revised, 12:7-10]

But one body must have parts that balance. Good nourishing intake. Good communication. Good boundary-setting. All result in thoughtful, compassionate, inspired, embodied service. Service to each other, to our own wounded and resilient selves, to an interconnected and hurting world.

For most of us, life is a balancing act between our strengths and our weakness, our propensities and our disinclinations.

A balancing act of our being sole and solitary and remarkable individuals. And our need to live in relationship – with partner, family, support group, faith community.

This year the Lakehead Board of Trustees chose “Community Cohesiveness” as our goal, our mantra, our collective spiritual path.

With community cohesiveness we ask: Who are we? Who do we want to be? How do we want to be with each other? What are our main values? How do we act as a group, move in the same direction, have the same vision of ourselves as unique individuals in blessed, caring community?

Not an easy task. Always a balancing act.

Guide our hands
in the service of healing
and uplifting.
Teach us to listen deeply,

to speak truth out in the open
to understand that we belong
to one another...
hand-in-hand.

Help us to mend goodness,
to insist upon compassion,
to repair the damaged world
in countless, daily ways.

*The fire in my heart... my soul flame burning
Is the fire in your heart... your soul flame burning
We are Spirit burning bright by the light of day... in the dark of night
We are shining like the sun and like the moon... like the Holy One.*

By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.

Nothing can separate us – not time, nor death, nor the space between the stars.
We are connected across the ages, across our obvious differences.

May we build a land of love and justice, compassion and goodness. Each one of us, and together.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.