

Wisdom in Community

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 15, 2020

I remember as a child I fell ill and had to be taken to the hospital. I don't remember much of this visit. A small, sterile room. But I do remember the nurse. I was scared and in a new place and didn't know what to think. But the nurse saw me, offered me a big smile, and asked me what kind of juice I would like. To this day I have not forgotten that nurse, her smile, and her cup of apple juice.

Kindness is like this. One simple act of kindness can radiate out; can create a gentle ripple effect, akin to tossing that one stone in the water and watching the rest of the water surrounding it react. This nurse and her simple smile touched my life that day and her smile remains with me. And this is kindness we can each replicate, never knowing the effect we will have on others.

Kindness and beloved community are deeply interconnected. Community is a gathering of our individual lives, souls, joined together to become something greater than our individual selves. And it is this greater something that we yearn for, that we need, that we intentionally create. That we intentionally create for strength, companionship, solidarity, support.

We are a community. And we are community in the midst of some scary things. In a way we are all like that child in a hospital room, scared, not knowing what to expect. Let's acknowledge the very fact that we need to worship online because of a pandemic. This can create anxiety and stress and may leave us feeling overwhelmed and that is ok and that is normal and that is why

we hold this sacred space. We are physically apart but we are spiritually together. To whom can we smile at? To whom can we offer a cup of apple juice?

We heard the words of Patrick Murfin, “We believe that many streams join to make a river.” Many streams join to make a river- we are each a stream, each one of us. A stream trickling towards a river, a stream filled with our own unique gifts, each one of us a different array of fish, algae, insects, vegetation and stones. And our community becomes a semblance of all of this – a river. A rich array of strengths and weaknesses, of a lifetime of stories and wisdom, joining together to make something larger. And all of the things a river can withstand! After a flood, the river returns. After a drought, the river returns. Throughout the seasons the river is there. We are this river – this community is this river – a river that will continue to be there whether we are in a drought or flooded with fear. What do we want to ripple out into our community; our river?

Beloved community is crucial if we want to survive and thrive. Many people have stories of life sustaining communities; to many folks this church is a life sustaining community! And I present you with you two stories I have been given permission to share.

The story of a young man who went off to college for the first time. He was overwhelmed by the vastness of it all. He felt isolated and alone surrounded by strangers and an unfamiliar community. In his struggles, he searched for familiar community. And in searching, found a religious home! He found a church. He found a home of folks who shared his values, who cared deeply about one another, and who joined together to have fun! Even though he was struggling

through this big life transition, he found folks he could relate to, who understood him. He learned from this community that it is ok to be yourself!

I think of another woman who found community through her passion: woodworking. No matter what this woman was experiencing in life, she had her woodshop to go to. Her shop that she shared with other artists dedicated to their crafts. They provided life sustaining support to each other. They could share ideas, they could share physical strength as they moved heavy objects, they could share creative ideas and understand and appreciate each other. Not only that – they could have fun! To this woman her shop was a “haven, the only place to go.” They garnered the wisdom that they were not alone, that there was always support, and that they never need give up.

In times like this we need these special communities – and we have this special community here amongst us. We are this place where it is ok to be ourselves. We are this place where we will never be alone, where we will always have support, and where we need never give up. This can be our safe haven. A community. A community tied together with kindness.

I am reminded of Mother Teresa, who asks us to be kind anyway. No matter what people are throwing at you, be kind anyway. Folks are anxious, upset, worried, angry, sad – be kind anyway. Our own emotions may be all over the place – be kind anyway. Offer that smile. That cup of juice. Let this kindness ripple out.

As Murfin wrote, “goodness may be pursued for the sake of goodness” Let us create that kind ripple simply because. Not expecting anything in return but contributing to the sacred community; contributing to this holy community without any expectation of a response. Our

church community, and the world around us. Kindness wherever we go. Goodness for the sake of goodness – a smile and a cup of juice just because – this is what will keep us all thriving.

And this ripple of kindness; this is emphasized in our interdependent web.

We are all interconnected – that is our 7th Principle of Unitarian Universalism. We affirm and promote the interconnected web of which we are all a part. We are in a time of great anxiety, worry. And yet in many ways our own web, our church, our community beyond church can be strengthened. We can grasp onto the web – that invisible thread that connects us all – hold on tight and let each and every one of us know that we are not alone. While our web may feel separated those threads connecting us are stronger than ever. And we need be intentional about this. Our intentions strengthen the bond. Our intentions of beloved community, love, support, and a need for laughter!

I share selection of a poem by Kenneth Patton,

We are all things, all persons,

Full and famished, good and bewildered,

Sly and honest, frightened and less frightened, ...

We are all things,

Tree and flower, moss and grass, mammal and reptile, bird and insect

The creature that is life is apart from nothing that lives

Not matter what we are feeling at any point in time, we are “all things, all persons,”

“frightened, and less frightened.” We are connected! Not only to each other but the continuity

that is nature – nature, what continues to go on no matter what. Just as we are connected to each other. Just as we unite our individual streams into one thriving river.

And so sacred community depends on kindness, depends on love, depends on shared wisdom.

Community lifts up an array of voices, ideas, we become something greater than ourselves.

Joining together creates a greater whole. We share our strengths, we share our weaknesses, we share our stories. We create community with ample opportunities to share stories and learn from one another. What wisdom we can receive! What wisdom we can create together! And what strength! We hear stories that date back generations. We hear stories in the midst of unfolding. We all have something to share, and sharing makes us wiser and stronger and connects our lives in sacred ways. Community is what we need today and in the days ahead; community will strengthen us, community will give us joy, and community will reinforce that we are not alone.

The Channing community. We have been likened to a campfire, providing warmth and companionship with one another and an illumination to bring what we have to the world around us. We are a sacred, holy community, joined together with common values and a desire for spiritual growth. In the midst of all of this uncertainty and fear, church life goes on! We are in the midst of Stewardship Month, and today is the day we collect pledges. Over the past two weeks we have heard an array of testimonials, from founders who created this church 27 years ago through a “labor of love,” to newer members who are fired up for the future! Our community cannot continue to thrive without stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. Today, we ask you to be generous in treasure. This community needs treasure in order to maintain all of our important ministries. To continue to be a spiritual home and refuge. We are here to

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kindle the flame, stoking that holy fire to maintain this necessary warmth, this necessary community, this necessary illumination. To those members and friends who have the means to do so, I ask that you consider this community and all it offers you, and reflect on the treasure you may have to share with this sacred community. Let us join together to sustain this crucial faith community. We rely on pledges of all sizes. Each and every dollar given helps this community thrive.

Our refuge. Our safe haven. Our interconnected web; invisible threads tying us together, never to break, only to strengthen. Where we can be ourselves and never be alone. Our many streams coming together to form one river; something much greater than our individual selves.

And in this community, and in our greater community around us, I pause to remind us of that nurse with her smile and her apple juice. Let us all provide smiles and juice, “goodness for the sake of goodness,” and let this kindness ripple out into our community and belong, as we comforting our scared community one kind act at a time.

May it be so, and Amen