

The Strength Between Us

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 4, 2026

Irish poet and priest John O'Donohue once wrote, "The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature."¹ We feel this in our bones as we seek friends, partners, companions from day to week to month to year. And when that belonging is lacking, we feel it intimately. I have had experiences that have left me feeling profoundly alone. The anguish of death. The aftermath of discord. These are experiences we all face. And in that deep isolation, fear can strengthen—a hidden tear, a solitary lament, giving way to a fear that makes us tremble. What we need in those moments is a companion. Someone simply to be there. We need one another.² Fear isolates us and amplifies our sorrow. Connection, community, and presence can begin to heal it. And sometimes, it is in the presence of another that courage begins. But isolation is not always simply the result of human fallibility or circumstance. Sometimes, it is intentionally cultivated.

Authoritarianism feeds on fear and isolation. And because belonging is such an innate human need, when it is threatened, we become vulnerable. Which leads us to today's questions: What happens when those in power use fear to separate us? When our human connections are weakened? When we are at our most vulnerable and afraid? What happens when, instead of turning toward one another, we are manipulated to turn against one another?

Scot Nakagawa wrote, "Authoritarian consolidation is a machine... that works through specific, predictable moves: arrest a few visible people early, to create examples. Use legal and financial pressure to make resistance expensive. Isolate resisters from their institutions and networks. Then let fear do the rest." Isolate and let fear do the rest. Authoritarian leaders want to induce divisiveness. And they are intentional in this work. Such leaders come to power not because they have the ability to suppress every act of resistance that could possibly arise. Instead,

¹ *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong* by John O'Donohue

² "We Need One Another" by George E. Odell

authoritarianism creates enough fear and uncertainty that people hesitate to resist – wondering, “will anyone else will join me?” and “Will I be safe?”³

Scot Nakagawa further wrote that neither is authoritarianism about brute force – which is what is so often depicted. It works, instead, through persistent and overwhelming fear, “Fear,” he writes, “above all, of one another.”⁴ Neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend. This works through distrust, and misinformation – weakening relationships that could otherwise lead to resistance. The 24-hour news cycle and insidious social media algorithms can feed a culture of fear. Images, stories, and rhetoric can depict migrants as violent or trans youth as a threat. — further isolating ourselves from one another. But fear does not stop there.

Disinformation - intentional and calculated lies - disorients us, causing us to second guess ourselves and question what is true, who we can trust, even if it’s simply trusting ourselves. We worry that we will be alone in our objections. We hesitate to be the first to say “no.” We wonder if we are wrong. We wonder whether speaking out will make things worse. The goal is not necessarily for everyone to support the regime, but to make people doubt one another.⁵ One of the most powerful tactics of an authoritarian regime is this: make citizens fearful, uncertain, and isolated. We need one another.

Fear is like a pebble tossed into a still pond. Its effects ripple outward, creating distrust, isolation, and division. One result of this ripple is the false simplicity that fear creates: us and them, safe and dangerous, friend and enemy, liberal and conservative. Fear simplifies the world. It turns people into a monolith. We stop seeing individuals and begin seeing categories. We are asked to choose a side, to decide who can be trusted and who cannot.

And in this process and throughout these distortions we long to protect ourselves. We want to believe that we are the “right” ones. But can our judgment of others sometimes keep us from honestly looking at ourselves? We want the other side to be cruel, unjust, and unworthy, lifting up our own innocence. Life is inherently easier that way. Rev. Cameron Trimble writes, “We

³ “Solidarity Is Not a Feeling” by Scot Nakagawa

⁴ “Fear Is the Fulcrum” by Scot Nakagawa

⁵ Ibid

want our own fear to look like virtue, our contempt to look like courage, and our desire for power to look like justice. We hope that if our side wins big enough, we will finally be safe.”⁶ I lift this up because solidarity requires more than standing together against something we believe is wrong. It also asks us to remain willing to examine ourselves—to question our assumptions, to notice where fear or contempt may have taken hold in us, and to remain open to the possibility that we, too, have something to learn.

There are tangible things we need to do in our fight against authoritarianism. We need to call out authoritarianism when we see it. We must unite against policies that consolidate power or punish dissent; policies harm our trans neighbors. Our indigenous neighbors. Our neighbors who are living in poverty. All those whose dignity and basic rights are threatened. We must be honest and courageous in the ways we respond to hate and prejudice. And, in this work, we must never turn on our own humanity. What would this look like – turning on our own humanity? It would mean refusing to let those in power change us for the worse. We cannot get caught up in labeling others in cruel and belittling ways. We cannot look at someone and simply deem them enemy. Immoral. Threat. Outsider. Because once we have reduced someone to a label, we no longer have to be curious about them, they become the “other.” We no longer have to see their complexity. And perhaps it’s precisely seeing another’s complexity that we are most deeply connected to shared humanity. So be curious.⁷ Curious as to why someone is so angry. Curious about where their hate comes from. Curious about what pain they have experienced. Curious about the losses they have endured. Curiosity does not excuse harm nor does it abandon accountability. Instead, it builds community. In building this kind of community, we strengthen exactly what authoritarianism seeks to weaken. It’s important to remember this. Authoritarianism does not simply want people to be afraid. It benefits when scared people disconnect from one another.⁸ Stay open. Be curious.

We are facing what Hannah Arendt calls, “manipulation by isolation.” Arendt writes, “This is why our insistence on belonging, community, and human connection is one of the greatest acts

⁶ “The Spell of the Enemy” Rev. Cameron Trimble

⁷ Ibid

⁸ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt

of courage and resistance in the face of oppression”⁹ She brings up the idea of divisiveness again – the “us vs. them” mentality - those divisions so meticulously created. Conservative vs liberal. Democrat versus Republican. When I think of these words by Hannah Arendt, I think of a road trip I took with my husband. One recent summer, we took a two-week drive from Maryland to New Mexico and back. On our way out West, we took a slow and deliberate tour of the Southern states. Roads lined with kudzu, farm stands selling fresh peaches, clusters of small, white churches. As we all know, there are pervasive stereotypes that separate the North from the South. And I carry some of these stereotypes with me. One night we stopped for dinner at one of the many steakhouses held in one small Texas town. A cowboy in full get-up came over and sat down with us. Together, the three of us shared a meal of cheeseburgers, fries and a Coke. We talked. We laughed. We shared stories. And somewhere during that meal, the category I had carried in my head—the idea of “them,” sparked by the cowboy hat and boots—became a person. A human being. And I was reminded how easily fear and assumptions can turn people into categories. A simple but meaningful exchange with someone different helped me to see beyond a stereotype to an individual, perhaps more like me than I’d have imagined.

One person has an idea. Two people share a meal. Ten people trust one another. Fifty people imagine something different. A hundred people discover the power of standing together. And what began as one person's conviction becomes a shared courage that fostered a movement. This reflection delineates the movement from “I” to “we.” Not “I have to do this alone” but “we get to do this together.” Not “I can never make a difference on my own” but “we can make a difference together.” We build relationships. We practice solidarity. We create communities where courage can take root. What becomes possible when we remember that we are in this together? No one person can make lasting change without community. But one person can begin to create a community through which greater, lasting change becomes possible.

And it is this change we create when a woman goes grocery shopping for an immigrant neighbor who is afraid to leave his house. When families check in on aging neighbors. When a

⁹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt

faith community creates a safe space for trans youth. And in this work, we come to realize we truly never were alone. Authoritarianism wants us to believe this. But we are born into this network of mutuality. Bound together by blood and by genes, bound together by proximity, bound by friendship and community. We are, each of us, intimately interwoven. And now we use this network and this web for change.

Scot Nakagawa writes “collective action ... reminds us how beautiful and powerful we can be when we’re together.” We need one another. We come together across our differences to create beauty in this world. To liberate the oppressed and fight for equity. And Nakagawa reminds us, we do not have to respond to terror with more terror. Our community, even while standing in the shadow of so much suffering and injustice, can still be one of joy and laughter. We can create change when we gather around food and music. When we sing together. When we dance. When we chant. When we march. When we share a meal and discover that strangers can become friends. So may we make room for joy alongside our courage. May we remember that coming together is not only how we resist what seeks to divide us. It is how we create the beautiful, loving, connected world we want to inhabit.¹⁰

We heard the quote from John O’Donohue earlier. “The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature.” The poet continues, “The ancient and eternal values of human life – truth, unity, goodness, justice, beauty, and love – are all statements of true belonging.”¹¹ We cultivate this unity and this beauty he so eloquently speaks of when we wholeheartedly embrace the communities we are a part of. It is okay to be afraid. That is why we are here together today: because we do not have to face our fears alone, and because there are things we can accomplish together that we cannot accomplish by ourselves. This is us – all of us – a wealth of views and experiences and ideas – Each of us carries something that our community needs. I want to leave you with insights from Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny* - tangible practices for resisting authoritarianism, mixed with my own ideas. Defend institutions that sustain community: libraries, journalism, courts, - our very church community. Give of your time,

¹⁰ “Fear Is the Fulcrum” by Scot Nakagawa

¹¹ *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong* by John O’Donohue

talent, and treasure. Don't normalize cruelty. Practice intentional kindness. Make eye contact. Talk to people. Create little microcosms of community wherever you go and with whomever you encounter. Support the causes that work for the kind of community you want to live in.¹² Resist complacency. Embrace connection. Most importantly: stay connected. Know that you belong. That everyone belongs. May we strengthen one another, fuel one another, support one another, love one another. So may our hands reach around these pews and find connection with our fellow sojourners. May we remember: we are not alone. We need one another.

May it be so, and Amen

¹² *On Tyranny* by Timothy Snyder