

We Are One

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU Ellicott City, MD February 7, 2021

I sat across the table from her, sipping on coffee as the café around us buzzed with clanking dishes and muffled conversation. Her eyes and demeanor were calm – different than I had seen in previous visits. We'll call this woman Kate, and I've been granted permission to share her story. Kate had suffered from alcoholism for many years, searching for healing but finding only hardship. She tried on her own to find a path to recovery but never quite made it. She told me that afternoon, over coffee and a plate of cookies, what changed her life. She found a group – people who were there to love and care for each other – a group of people who were not going to judge her but who would accept her for exactly who she was. She entered her first ever Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

She was in her late thirties entering this room, but it was the first time in her life she had encountered such an open, loving community. It was the first time she was part of a community who held her in loving embrace for exactly who she was – all of who she was. Including her addiction. She was given the opportunity to share her story and hear from others. And this acceptance – this led to healing. To profound healing. To a life of sobriety. She feared stigma and was met with love – she no longer saw herself as a failure, but a worthy person with wisdom to share. To me this directly speaks to the power of Beloved Community. Starhawk writes, “We are all longing to go home to some place ... Somewhere we can be free.”¹ Expecting rejection, Kate found home.

Beloved Community is a space where everyone can join together and be accepted and held in loving embrace – no matter what identities one may have. People of diverse racial, ethnic, educational, class,

¹ *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2021* Starhawk

gender, sexual orientation backgrounds and identities.² People who struggle daily with mental health or addiction. People who regularly face stigma and oppression. People of any physical ability. Everyone is welcome – everyone. In Beloved Community, we love the stranger – we love seeking nothing in return. Just like Kate observed in that Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room.

Beloved Community, to me, highlights in profound ways two of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles – respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Each and every person has inherent worth. And what affects one affects us all.

We heard a story earlier about a little black girl and a little white girl, living side by side but being warned by their parents never to cross the fence that divided them – to remain separate. The story highlights racism – a world where black folks and white folks are not meant to be together. A divided world – in this case tangibly, forced to separate lives by a fence. And yet those children did what many adults have not – they met on the fence, shared stories, got to know each other, and became friends – even when they were told not to. They created their own tiny microcosm of Beloved Community – with the belief that “some day somebody’s going to come along and knock this old fence down,” – that someday there would not be a barrier trying to separate them.³ Let us each dismantle that fence dividing us and hear each other’s stories, be curious about one another’s lives, love each other, let us simply become friends.

For, as these fictional children demonstrated, we are one. All of us are connected through our interdependent web – those who came before, those who are with us now, and those yet to come. We are a diverse collective of races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, educations, mental health – a

² <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

³ *The Other Side* Jacqueline Woodson

patchwork of identities all intricately woven together where what affects one reverberates out to affect all. If we intentionally celebrate this, if we actively work towards connection, we are blessed with a collective sharing of gifts, experiences, wisdom – we create that Beloved Community. If done wrong we share that hate, animosity and inequality that maintains those fences dividing us – dividing us as a community, a nation, a world.

Hope Johnson writes of creating Beloved Community by engaging deeply with this idea of our shared humanity – of the understanding that we all are, indeed, “one.” That together we need question, seek and search. Together we must struggle and make mistakes. Together we must ask questions and together we must listen. Together we need to love our neighbors and together we need to love ourselves. Through grappling with the intricacies of life together, we grow together, and create together. We create a “diverse group of proudly kindred spirits.” We are one.⁴

Those who risked their lives to cross country borders, those forced to spend their days on cots behind steel bars, those single parents working multiple jobs – even though each identity feels so very separate and as if these lives would never overlap, in Beloved Community those strands that hold us together hurt us all when one hurts and delight us all when one delights. We can seek out and appreciate the stories and wisdom from those of all walks of life.

What we cannot do is grow as a society and as a people if we see each other through the lens of dichotomies and stereotypes and false narratives. We are a community of one, and as such we need each other in complex and intricate ways.

Earlier we heard the words of George E. Odell, “We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again... All our lives we are in need, and others

⁴ “One Love” Hope Johnson

are in need of us.”⁵ That is why we create community – because we all need! We all need. We need a place to go when grieving, when we are in despair, when we share accomplishments and when we slip away from this realm. It is community that guides us through all of this. And if we enter into the shared space of Beloved Community, we widen the circle of concern; we care for and receive help from groups we may not regularly encounter – our needs are met with a rich array of caring responses.

In Beloved Community we all learn and gain strength and wisdom from one another. We enter into a covenant of mutual respect, love, and compassion. There is not a hierarchical effect of privileged helping marginalized but each person offering strength and wisdom and love and guidance. We need one another in order to truly understand ourselves and the rest of humanity. Those who have never faced addiction can learn strength from those who wake up every morning with the determination in their hearts not to drink or drug. Those who have much can learn from those who have little about not seeing worth in terms of wealth. Those who have never experienced mental illness can learn compassion from those who have. Those who hate can learn from those who were met with animosity and responded with love. People from dominant cultures need to learn from those within subcultures if they want an enriched life benefiting from a beautiful array of artwork, wisdom, food and folklore. Yes, those with privileged identities need to use their resources to help those facing marginalization. And, in order to fully live into our beautiful collective, the giving and receiving is reciprocal.

We need to understand injustice in order to be a source for justice. We need to hear lived experiences in order to overcome stigma and false narratives that lead to oppression. We need one another. I am reminded of that fence we need to take apart plank by plank if we are all to live in Beloved Community together.

⁵ *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2021* George E. Odell

I am reminded of another woman whose story I have been given permission to share, whom I met while volunteering at the National Alliance on Mental Illness. This woman's story of the power her faith community encouraged me to find my own. We'll call her Mary.

Since childhood Mary struggled with mental health concerns. Throughout her life she had been given several diagnoses. She sometimes struggled with psychosis. She spent years and years struggling with the effects of her illnesses, where many days felt like a struggle simply to survive. After giving birth, she battled daily with debilitating postpartum depression. She expressed to me the struggles she faced each and every day simply to get through the day. And she did this largely alone – knowing the stigma that came with the diagnoses she faced – terrified at bringing her true, full self to the world around her. And in her isolation, suffered. And yet she worked hard – she worked so very hard. She went to therapy, tried various medications, and, eventually, healed enough to engage with the world around her. And yet still this fear of bringing her full self into a room lingered and hovered over her like a shadow – an oppressive, heavy, debilitating shadow. The one community she felt safe in was her church community – so she gently, and with great bravery, tested the waters. She told her pastor and he accepted her with open arms. She branched out and shared some of her experiences with those close to her and found acceptance. She shared with increasing bravery and pride her story of struggle and survival and within that sacred faith community found the Beloved Community she had been searching for her whole life – that Beloved Community that embraced her for exactly who she was. She first told me this story with tears brimming in her dark eyes, still so full of gratitude and faith and love after finding that sacred collective that allowed her to be her. She began doing her own work of creating Beloved Community by dedicating her time to the National Alliance of Mental Illness – stripping away stigma by sharing her story – by humanizing mental illness – by reconstructing stories of fear and judgement with those of strength and survival. She learned that she had a remarkable story to share – that what she experienced could enrich lives.

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I learned so much from this woman that I still carry with me today – lessons and wisdom that only comes from lived experience. I learned strength to keep trying even when all feels helpless. I learned how to take hardship and turn it into strength – to turn suffering into compassion. This woman traversed the rocky terrain, soul cloaked in fear of sharing her true, full, beautiful self with the world around her. As Starhawk reflected “We are all longing to go home to some place ... Someplace we can be free”⁶ Mary was liberated.

There are so many hidden stories I have been blessed to hear, and many that I have not. There are a myriad of stories of folks searching for their own Beloved Community – stories from which I can learn so much. Stories from black, indigenous, people of color lifting up perseverance and survival. Stories of those of so many genders finding beautiful ways to express their true selves. Stories of those who grew up in poverty or those of immigrants or the stories of those behind bars. I think of the woman who found sobriety when she was met with open arms, or Mary who overcame debilitating illness, in part because her church community welcomed her for exactly who she was. What other deep wounds can be healed through the power of Beloved Community? What other stories are there of those who we otherwise may not have encountered?

“We are all longing to go home to some place ... Someplace we can be free.” We all want to be free. We all seek Beloved Community. We can all imagine a Beloved Community, where each and every one of us can bring our full selves. And while we can imagine this ideal world it does not come easily – it does not simply happen, or we would already be there. We would already be in Beloved Community. It takes work – educating ourselves, moving out of our comfort zones. Having difficult conversations with folks who have identities we are not familiar with – or maybe even with whom we hold resentment, judgement, or fear. Listening to and truly hearing lived experiences of others so that false stories do not

⁶ *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2021* Starhawk

become our narrative; so that stigma and oppression do not dictate how we navigate the world around us. We need to engage with podcasts and books and articles highlighting the lives of those on the margins. We need to initiate and stay engaged in difficult conversations. To acknowledge prejudices and dismantle them. To examine our own culture and see how we can be more welcoming to others.

We are called to do this work. We are called to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person – and to celebrate this. To learn from each other’s unique stories in order to find understanding and acceptance. We are called to love so that what reverberates in our web is not hate and fear but compassion and understanding. We are called to do this work so that we can each walk into a room of strangers and know we can be accepted for exactly who we are. So we can sit on that fence, getting to know one another, working towards that day where we can “knock that old fence down.”⁷ So that each person is able to bring their full selves out to the world, embraced in Beloved Community; so that each one of us can go home, someplace where we can be free.

May it be so, and amen.

⁷ *The Other Side* Jacqueline Woodson