

Walking Together: The iFellowship

A Sermon for the UU Fellowship of Silver City

October 23, 2016 by Rev. Claudia Elferdink

In my childhood home in Temple City, California, a yellow wall phone was mounted above the counter near the back door. It was the only phone in the house and calls for everyone in the family came to that one phone. If I answered the phone when my mother's friend Loa called, we often had a friendly chat before I let my mother know Loa was on the phone. A ringing phone was exciting- we never knew who would be calling! Inevitably, I was embarrassed if a boy called for me and my father struck up a conversation before I was called to the old-fashioned rotary-dial phone. I would know my mother was making calls for the Sunday School as I passed on the way outside to play. We knew each other's business because it was a family telephone. It was the way it was and it served to bind our family in our connections to each other and our community.

Over the decades, "smart phones" and the iPhone in particular, have turned the telephone into a communication and information tool for one singular individual. It is not a center for family interaction. The iPhone is designed for one individual, not a family or even a couple.

Have you ever tried sharing your photographs on your smart phone with someone? Before they can get it in their hand, the screen has gone black and usually they are not familiar with your particular phone's photo display eccentricities. They feel awkward holding your personal device and it often turns into a sad attempt to share. In many ways, the telephone is no longer on the kitchen wall.

I admit I'm feeling a bit nostalgic about the old yellow wall phone. But believe me, I'm thoroughly addicted to my iPhone. The immediate gratification of making phone calls almost anywhere, texting, access to the internet, a camera, and more, in one small portable instrument is almost intoxicating. My needs as an individual are well filled.

The unintended consequences of this transformation from a family sharing center to multipurpose communication device for one person are many. We are more isolated from one another. Our lives do not cross around the telephone. We are more solitary and self-sufficient. We need each other less.

It is no small accident that the evolution from a family wall phone to an iPhone happened in America. America is the land known for personal, individual liberty. Even our constitution contains a bill of rights listing our individual rights which are very powerful. America was founded in the times of the enlightenment where individual rights emerged. Our American founders were steeped in the philosophy and values of enlightenment thinking where reason and individualism were supreme. As Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am."

Some of America's unique qualities are directly connected to our devotion to radical individualism: the abundance of cars and reluctance to commit to public transportation; the dedication to the right of almost anyone to have a gun; virtually unbridled capitalism and a high poverty rate; and the soaring personal costs of higher education.

Before we move on to the religious implications to living in a nation that values radical individualism, for the sake of those who weren't here last time, here is a quick review. We are exploring "Walking Together." In other words taking the perspective of "we," not just "I." This is the core idea of covenant. Nothing will be decided now. To help this conversation we are using the important tool of translation. When someone uses a word you are uncomfortable with, come up with a synonym that works. For example for covenant, you might use promise or walking together. When you are walking together, or in covenant, it doesn't really matter if you agree with each other. What matters is your character, how you show respect, humility and love. And if you see human nature as good and hopeful.

The groundwork of the Enlightenment was laid in the Reformation. Unitarian Universalism first emerged during Reformation in Transylvania. Later it traveled through England and to America during the Enlightenment. We began with the peasant revolts which launched the Reformation, much more than Luther's 95 theses. Much of the unrest in the reformation was poor people, called serfs, who were treated as totally unimportant. Their lives were desperate and they were at the mercy of nobles who used them like slaves.

The catholic clergy were often corrupt and stole the poor people's money for their own purposes. The reformation began a long slow process of improving the lives of the poor.

At the same time, the new invention of printing press was making Bibles and other books more available, and along with that came literacy. People began to read the Bible themselves rather than depend on Catholic officials to read and interpret. Common people could read and interpret for themselves. That broke the clergy's monopoly on reading and interpreting the scriptures. What the common people found in the scriptures was much more supportive of their daily struggles. Toward the end of the reformation, it was the Unitarians who recognized not the pope's, not the bishop's, not the minister's, but the individual layman's right to interpret the Bible for themselves. With this ability to interpret the Bible for themselves, diversity of belief became inevitable. This stage of the reformation was called the Radical Reformation.

Furthermore, when Unitarianism later came to America and the Unitarian Church began to form in 1819, each congregation was given congregational polity, the final religious authority that had belonged to Popes and Bishops. Unitarian Churches were not run by a Pope, instead, the congregation together, made its own ultimate decisions on its principles and values. In other words, how it would together make decisions. To avoid constant congregational meetings, most congregations chose leaders, usually a Board, entrusted to day to day governing. How that trust played out is at the core of a covenantal relationship. Many congregations had written covenants, some had unwritten covenants which members knew as "this is who we are, and this is how we treat each other."

So this is why UU's have radical individualism in our bones. To us, what it means to be religious involves deep respect for the individual and giving ultimate power to each congregation. And that has been part of who we are for over 400 years.

Radical individualism is so deep in our bones, that it can be hard to recognize- both its strengths and weaknesses. Many of us have been attracted to Unitarian Universalism because of the

individualism and freedom we see. It is real. Too often the responsibilities that go with that freedom are overlooked.

And here is where we come to the iFellowship, or the iChurch, or even the iCongregation. Like with the iPhone, have we taken individualism in the iFellowship too far? Believe me, I am not speaking specifically of this Silver City Fellowship. This question is raised in Unitarian Universalist fellowships and congregations in general, and all over the country.

If we always start with “i” in relating to our spiritual community, we are beginning with radical individualism. A member of the program committee might ask, “Did you like today’s program?” “Yes, I did.” “I would like a program on food security.” “I wish the Board would reduce expenses.” “I wish no one ever said God in our services.” “I would like the service to be at 10:30 instead of 10am.”

How do you honor diversity and protect the health and well-being of a congregation? What is the importance of all the individual preferences and demands?

The tendency in many congregations is to try to please everybody. Too often people feel entitled to their personal preferences. Sometimes changes are made because of one person’s comment. What is left is functioning at the lowest common denominator. The role of the Fellowship or congregation together goes back to the reformation. In rejecting the Pope/Bishop hierarchy, the Fellowship together takes on the hierarchy’s responsibility for the well-being of the congregation. This is a large task and needs a united fellowship.

We forget that pleasing everyone is not our purpose. Our mission is our purpose, and we are here together to serve our mission. Some may not be pleased with mission-centered decisions. Respectful conversations may happen. If a mission is taken seriously, some folks who don’t get their way may leave. Leaders need to lead with compassion and conviction.

Here is your mission statement. How does it speak to the “we” and the “I”?

The UUFSC seeks to support its members on their shared life journeys through stimulating, inspiring worship services and caring, nurturing programs.

We also strive to serve the larger community within which we live, committing ourselves to socially responsible outreach, while building connections with community that will encourage diversity and growth with the Fellowship.

Leaders and members deserve respect and kindness. Conflict and disagreement are exactly when covenants are most needed, to guide everyone in a mutually agreed upon way. Covenants are relational. A covenantal fellowship knows that how a conflict is worked through is more important than the final resolution. Maintaining a loving, supportive community, even in disagreement, is a commitment everyone has already made in agreeing to the covenant.

A covenantal fellowship means give and take all around, and sometimes even sacrifice. Giving up a favorite project can be needed for the good of the whole. Sometimes a person takes on a big responsibility not because they want to, but because they feel their strengths are needed at the time. A member may make a big stretch and give up vacation money to help an important outreach project. It may mean compassion when someone loses their way. It means a heartfelt ask for forgiveness. This generosity and trust from the whole fellowship makes community work.

From our opening words by Jack Riemer,

It takes an act of will for us to make a turn.

It means breaking with the old habits.

It means admitting that we have been wrong and this is never easy.

It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful.

It means saying: I am sorry.

It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are hard to do.

But unless we turn, we will be wrapped forever in yesterday's ways.

You may have noticed I have moved from "I" to "we." In our focus on individualism, we often forget that we all share responsibility for the well-being of the whole fellowship. This is what congregational polity is all about. In replacing the pope and bishops, our members of the fellowship together take responsibility for the vitality and well-being of the fellowship. No one is looking over from some hierarchy. You are the hierarchy. You entrust and support your own leaders. How you are as a religious community and how you choose and support your leaders determines how you fill your mission.

How you respect and care for each other depends on how the entire fellowship honors a functional, well-used covenant. Whether or not the covenant is nicely framed on the wall, it is most important that it is in your hearts and in practice.

We as modern Unitarian Universalists know how to think as individuals. But I wonder how well we think and live as a Fellowship or congregation. How do we do "we."

Understanding covenant is partly about our world view. Last time I talked about individuals coming together to create a covenant.

As I said last week, covenants are functional. Sometimes they are written down after the whole congregation or fellowship has had lots of time to review and tweek. Usually, when it has become so familiar that no one has any more to say, a vote is taken and it is usually unanimous. Often a pretty copy is framed and hung on the wall, or sometimes filed away in a drawer.

You have such a covenant that was recently found in a file. It was voted on at an annual meeting. It is twenty years old, apparently never used, and forgotten until two weeks ago.

Having a covenant twenty years ago was pioneering! It is the work of this Fellowship to decide how to move forward.

Creating a covenant by individuals coming together is doing it from a "radical individualist" perspective. People are functioning as individuals, each deciding to participate and later each voting.

The individual, first. Then community.

Rebecca Parker, offered another way to covenant as well. It begins not with the “I”, but with community, the “we.”

We need to remember that “we” is just important as “I” in our tradition. If we get these out of balance, our congregations, individuals and our Unitarian Universalist tradition all suffer.

We begin with the question, What have we been given?

We have all been given our lives.

We have all been given our amazing and vulnerable earth.

Through no action of our own, we are all given life and our planet home.

As Rebecca Parker said, “We are born into relationship before we shape relationship by our conscious intention. We inherit covenant before we create covenant..... Our verbal promises are the frosting on the cake. They aren’t the cake itself. They may help us keep the covenant we are in, but they are not the covenant itself.”

Whether you come together as individuals and create a covenant, whether you embrace the covenant that you together are born into, or whether you decide covenanting is not for you, the opportunity to be in deeper relation in this Fellowship is yours.

Next time, Walking Together: Going Deeper.