

You Are Known

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Adam knew Eve – and then baby made three. But we are not talking about that kind of knowing this morning. We are talking about the kind of knowing to which Martin Buber would inspire us with his philosophy of I and Thou; a kind of knowing each other and the world that takes us beyond the surface of either. We are talking about recognizing and knowing the divine and the holy (the worth and dignity) within each and all of us – the kind of knowing that motivated 14th century Sufi poet, Hafiz, to write this poem: (remember that Sufis use many different words and phrases to name what is holy; in this poem those include “the Woman,” “your many charms,” and “The Beautiful One,” among others)

Because the Woman I love lives
 Inside of you,
 I lean as close to your body with my words
 As I can-
 And I think of you all the time, dear pilgrim.
 Because the One I love goes with you
 Wherever you go,
 Hafiz will always be near.
 If you sat before me, wayfarer,
 With your aura bright from your many
 Charms,
 My lips could resist rushing to you and needing
 To befriend your blushed cheek,
 But my eyes can no longer hide
 The wondrous fact of who
 You Really are.
 The Beautiful One whom I adore
 Has pitched His royal tent inside of you,
 So I will always lean my heart
 As close to your soul
 As I can.

Hafiz writes about that pull between us to connect with each other, to say “Love me” with our eyes and “I am hungry to know you” with our words. We want to know others, but, perhaps most of all, we want to be known, ourselves. We want someone to acknowledge us and care about us.

We feel all this, even as so much of science and philosophy is telling us we live in an indifferent universe. There is no caring “out there” we think we are being told when we learn about our world through the physicist’s pencil or the astronomer’s telescope. There is only the caring which humans and other living beings have contributed to the earth because that trait is of value to our survival.

I have to say I disagree with those for whom the universe is a totally cold and unknowing place. Physics also tells us that everything – everything – is of the same substance. And everything – everything – is connected and responsive to what happens in the rest of the universe. Even our thoughts have effect in the interdependent web of existence. If this is so, then what I do matters. And if what I do matters, then I feel recognized and known by the universe. Hildegard of Bingen, Christian mystic, put my feeling into words: “You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God.” But this all takes place in my head – the arms of mystery lack a certain warmth.

Another aspect of physics posits that once particles have been in a relationship, there remains an entanglement, a recognition, between those particles for all time. Although some scientists caution against extrapolating such subatomic information up into the world of complex beings, one cannot help but see this as similar to our understanding that our own personal relationships change us forever. So I do see some possibility of taking a kind of abstract comfort in the stability, continuity, and infinite connectivity of the universe. But it doesn't help much when I am sad and lonely. And it is hard to get a lot of feedback about my life or my thoughts from the universe.

Can we turn to ourselves to fulfill our yearnings for depth and companionship? Sometimes. After all, it is said that loving and understanding ourselves, knowing our own self-worth, is the first step to being able to have successful relationships with others. And we all know that Unitarian Universalism is beset with the “I can do it myself” kind of spirituality. But this emphasis on the individual can be taken too far. May we heed the warning in this essay by UU minister David Bumbaugh:

“The fall from grace, the great disruption of primordial order, the original sin, had nothing to do with eating apples or talking with snakes. The instrument of our fall was a wooden back-scratcher, that piece of wood, bent at the end so one can reach the unreachable spot – there, between the shoulder blades, down just a little bit lower, now up a little bit, there where the most persistent itch always takes up residence.

Before the back-scratcher, before that simple, infernal device, we, like all our primate kin, depended on others to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: ‘You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.’ The wooden back-scratcher dissolved the bonds of reciprocity, unloosed the ties of community, and tempted us to believe in our own godlike self-sufficiency.

And God walked in the cool of the garden, and saw a primate standing alone. ‘What have you done,’ God asked, ‘that you stand alone?’

‘I have found a back-scratcher,’ said the beast, ‘and now I need no one.’

And thus began our wandering, our pacing up and down the earth, scratching our own itches, pretending self-sufficiency, trying to ignore the persistent sense of loss, the vague yearning for a primordial order.

A wooden back-scratcher is a poor compensation for the gentle touch of a living hand.”

And herein you find the essence of my sermon this morning. Please pledge generously to this Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst so that, with real live people, we can continue to scratch your unreachable itches, whatever their nature.

Our itch to be known is scratched in so many ways at UUSA, your religious community. Consider that you are known, more or less well, by the person sitting next to you. Even if you have not been introduced they know you by the warmth of your arm or shoulder, the way you hold your hands on your lap, the tone of your voice when you sing, or don't sing, the color of the clothes you are wearing. This is all a kind of passive knowing.

But our intention here, in religious community, is to go way beyond the passive – into an active knowing and recognition and affirmation of each other. Life is better, together. Salvation is not a solo act. Wherever two or more are gathered..... There are so many ways to say it. It is important, spiritually, to feel that you are known.

Paul Tillich wrote: “We have considered the depth of the world and the depth of our souls. But we are only in a world through a community of [people]. And we can discover our souls only through the mirror of those who look at us. There is no depth of life without the depth of the common life.” Common as in communal.

At UUSA we are a microcosm of the larger world. Here we try to provide various ways by which we can connect with each other as well as that which is larger than ourselves. The social hour following the service was not invented so that we can run around and finish up any business we still have to do before our next meeting. We gather together, with those universal solvents, food and drink, to process and further our worship experience, to smile at people we know, to get to know those we don't.

We gather in small groups to talk about our spiritual journeys – and that doesn't just mean how we define the ultimate or what we think happens when we die. Our spiritual journeys happen in the everyday connections and decisions of real life – not only in the ethereal world of the abstract. Here, in religious community we engage in real life decisions – and real life relationships.

But we do also talk about our spiritual beliefs and understandings, where they began and where they are now. With the support and encouragement of our fellow members and friends we grow and change and grow some more. Even as a minister my spiritual path continues to evolve – and you are the medium in which this is happening.

We gather to have fun and fellowship – to dance and sing – to talk about movies and books – we get to know each other and our ideas. We share in the safety of covenanted behavior, trusting our lives and our souls to be loved, respected, and known to others. We laugh together. And we cry together. There are very few places in our world, today, where it is possible to be known by others on the level that is possible here. Here, your itch can be scratched by a living person. Maybe even the itch on your back.

When I was in first grade, my teacher picked me to play Anna in a performance of a song from The King and I. It was called Getting to Know You. I have been feeling like Anna again this year, not a teacher exactly, but your minister. And if I could sing I would sing you this song, but

instead I will just tell you the words: “Getting to know you, getting to know all about you. Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me. Getting to know you, getting to feel free and easy. When I am with you, getting to know what to say. Haven’t you noticed suddenly I’m bright and breezy? Because of all the beautiful and new things I’m learning about you, day by day.”

I have found real joy in knowing you, as well as in becoming known by you.

There are many valid reasons for wanting to support this building and this community. We have been concentrating on only one of them this morning. Today, please consider giving as generously as you are able to support this rather amazing place where you are known for the real and lovely and questioning and sometimes hurting person that you are.

Lean your hearts as close to the souls of each other as you possibly can. I will be leaning my heart, as well.

You are known.