

A Life of Wild and Creative Generosity of Spirit

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

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4/14/2019

Time for All Ages

Ask for two volunteers:

- one to hold a piece of ice until it's too uncomfortable
- one to use a timer to count how many seconds that takes (maybe the lay worship leader?)

I want to teach you a vocabulary word: proxy.

A proxy is something that substitutes for something else.

For example, we're having a congregational meeting in June, where we'll make decisions together by voting. But some members might be out of town, so they can ask a friend to be their proxy during the votes. However some of our decisions are extra important, like changing the bylaws, and you have to be here in person.

So a proxy is a really useful substitute, but it's not exactly the same thing, and it doesn't always work as well as the real thing.

Ok, now for something completely different. I'm going to teach you all a dance move.

If you're sitting, join in anyway. No need to sweat to enjoy the fun.

Dance to music. (Hymn: let it be a dance we do)

Now ask the two volunteers to repeat the ice situation.

You may be wondering how the ice and the dancing fit together. Well, we're playing with a research study by a scientist named Bronwyn Tarr.

She was testing whether dancing together helped people build community. But how do you measure community? How do you know if there is more community after dancing than before dancing? What's a good proxy for community? (Ideas?)

Well, Bronwyn Tarr knows that when people love each other, their brain creates something in their body called endorphins. And when you have endorphins floating around in your body, you are less bothered by discomfort.

So if you're feeling more connected to community, you should be able to hold an ice cube for longer.

So, tell me Lisa, how many seconds did [Name] hold the ice cube before we danced? How about after we danced? Interesting!

Of course, this wasn't a real scientific experiment, but I hope that getting your body involved helped you understand and have fun.

And if you'd like to have more fun, make sure you come to Pledge Fest next Saturday.

There will be activities all day to get your endorphins pumping, including cinnamon rolls for breakfast; tie-dying; ecstatic dance, yoga, and zumba; sitting around chatting over cups of coffee; going outside to play in the labyrinth; and some workshops and samplers of some of our ongoing groups.

There is breakfast and lunch, childcare all day, and an all-ages potluck dinner with fabulous music provided by our very own members.

Everyone here is invited.

Sermon

In a sermon during her church's generosity campaign, Rev. Virginia Safford tells a story of a woman getting off the subway on a cold afternoon. On the platform, she senses that she's only holding **one** of her gloves, and as she looks back onto the train, she sees that indeed, the other glove is on the seat she just left. The doors begin closing, and what does she do?

She tosses the glove in her hand onto the seat, to join its mate. Safford reflects: "she must have lived a long life of generosity, a life of wild and creative generosity of spirit, to be able to think so quickly, to act so urgently and healthily to know precisely in that moment what would bless the world right then and there."

Today I'm interested in exploring not just how we can, individually, cultivate long lives of wild and creative generosity of spirit, but also how humanity as a whole does so. And so I want to start with some evolutionary psychology: social bonding among primates.

The main method chimpanzees and other apes have for building relationships is grooming: picking bugs out of each other's fur. I bet you didn't expect to hear about bugs in fur today at church! But it's very important! Here's why.

Beyond the basic necessity of hygiene (that sometimes we apes need a bit of help with) social grooming also releases endorphins, so, in one

scientist's words, "you feel warm and cozy toward whoever is grooming you."

And then you're more likely to help them out in times of need. Even if it's not a transactional thing (you eat my bugs and I'll eat yours) so that better-bonded *individuals* fare better in life, better-bonded *groups* fare better because they're more resilient.

But there's only so much group cohesion that can grow out of one-on-one grooming sessions. Even if an ape spent all her waking hours grooming with other apes, she'd still have a small number of bonded friends. Human societies are bigger than other primate societies, so we must have developed other ways to create community.

This is the topic taken up by researcher Bronwyn Tarr, who hypothesized that music and dance were the next step evolutionarily, allowing us to engage with each other in larger groups than if we stuck to pairwise connections. In an audio story on PRX, I heard her say, "That feeling that you get when you find yourself in a surprising yet perfect oneness with others..., in the presence of music... I get it everytime I dance... Why does it have that intense effect on people when they engage with others through music and dance?"

As an evolutionary neuroscientist, she was predisposed to think it must have something to do with survival.

She went to rural Brazil to work with teenagers and test her hypothesis.

Her plan was to teach them three simple dance moves, with synchronized steps, and test their "warmth and coziness" before and after they danced together.

Through a series of experiments, she found that their endorphins were raised by dancing together. (Actually, she used pain threshold as a proxy for endorphins, which is an indicator for warmth and coziness... such is science!)

Now, it wasn't just the exertion that made people feel good about being together, because even sitting in chairs and dancing a slow, no-sweat (but synchronized!) version of the dance did the trick.

And, if you're skeptical about the warmth-and-coziness variable, Bronwyn Tarr's research subjects also *said* they liked each other better after dancing together.

If you know me, you are probably not surprised at how tickled I was to hear this story on my car radio, driving home from church one day. But it's not just because I'm a dancer. I'm also delighted by the apparent evolutionary link between one-on-one relationships and the success of large groups -- that grooming each other and dancing together do the same thing to us physiologically.

Because as much as I relate to the dancing teenagers in the research study, I also relate to the apes grooming each other. There are a range of ways that we humans have for getting that feeling of “surprising yet perfect oneness with others,” and I see church encompassing them.

On a spiritual level, I am awed and grateful that humanity stumbled upon methods of bonding with people beyond our intimate spheres, people we don't even have to touch physically, people we may not even ever meet. On a practical level, UU church is a way to practice and affirm these connections.

When I arrived here last fall, Mary Lou contacted me to do a 1:1 meeting. We sat in the chapel, overlooking the garden, and even though I was new to the community, I began to feel a part of it because I felt like I *knew* Mary Lou.

Later when I took the Spokane Alliance Leadership Institute, I realized what she'd been up to. She was building a public relationship with me. It was a little like friendship, but somehow bigger. She really wanted to get to know me, not out of curiosity or pure kindness or because she wanted something from me,

but because she expected that my personal story would connect to hers.

Sharing our individual stories would allow us to start living a shared story.

She wasn't just grooming me; she was grooming me for the work of the church. Ultimately, as you may suspect if you know Mary Lou, she wanted to *accomplish* something, but she was profoundly open-minded about what that *something* would be.

It was like she was inviting me to dance, inviting me to try out some of her steps, and to teach her some of mine. In the conversation, she created a space for us to find some completely new steps together, that we might want to share with others.

She was embodying and enacting a principle I sum up like this: **Community is not made up of individuals, but rather relationships.** During that one-on-one, we didn't know where we were going, but we sensed we could go far.

I think this is our evolutionary destiny: even as we continue to be nourished by close friendships and partnerships, we are evolving more expansive connections.

Back in the era when economists had time to read philosophers, and philosophers could also be famous mathematicians, the economist Friedrich Hayek was inspired by the mathematician and founder of process theology, Alfred North Whitehead.

Whitehead had come to believe that **the world is not made up of objects, but rather processes.** He argued that “there is urgency in coming to see the world

as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us.”

Perhaps it's not surprising that many Unitarian Universalist thinkers, with our seventh principle about the interdependent web of all existence, include Whitehead in our lineage.

It may be surprising that we are cousins to Friedrich Hayek, often considered the father of neoliberal economics, but such is the interdependent web!

Let's listen to our cousin for a moment.

Hayek believed that the primary problem of economics is not how to allocate scarce resources, but rather how to allocate decision-making to the right people, people who know the most about their own situation, and how to get them the additional knowledge they need to make their decisions.

Hayek observed that in many settings, the problem is actually solved for us, in absence of any conscious effort, because we have markets.

For example, the price of beeswax goes up when people get really excited about natural candles, or when bees are suffering and producing less wax. Candle users don't know why the price goes up, but we use less, and look for substitutes. Now the price of palm oil candles goes up. The producers of other candles now make an effort to make more, and palm oil candle enthusiasts make an effort to use less, maybe even switching to paraffin.

The effects of the initial change reverberate, without a single conversation about the cause.

With a fervor much like that of the evolutionary psychologists I discussed earlier, Hayek writes about the marvel of the price system to coordinate the actions of independent individuals, who each hold their own piece of the truth.

He trusted the price system to enable countless people to “move in the right direction” without even knowing the reasons they need to move.

He considered it miraculous that humanity stumbled upon this symbolic method of communicating an incomprehensible amount of information among an incomprehensible number and diversity of individuals.

Many critics question this glowing review of the price system.

We know that the prices of goods and labor sold by people without political power is suppressed, so their buying power is limited, and they cannot trust the market to meet their needs.

We know that ideologies like racism and lies like race have been concocted to justify outright theft of not just land and labor, but bodies and minds. In times and places where basic human rights are ignored, the idealized free market, which depends on people's agency to make decisions, is a sham.

Not to mention the bees and other parts of our natural world who will **never** have a say in markets.

As people who care for justice, we cannot trust the market to communicate our values seamlessly across the globe.

And yet we cannot deny its function and unavoidability for pursuing our goals.

So we engage in markets **and** insist on communicating our values other ways. We write letters to the editor and post on Facebook. We teach, and educate ourselves and our children. We read the Black Lens. We vote. We donate money to organizations that help people vote, or help them get away from terror, or get housing and food.

And we give to the church, which sustains our values, reminding us when our values slip out of our overloaded lives. We give money to the church as a natural extension of the time and presence we offer to the church.

Because we are more than just our money, but how we **spend** our money is a useful, if imperfect, proxy of who we are. We give to the church because we know there is no proxy for community.

Compared to other religious groups, Unitarian Universalists have the highest or second highest per capita income and the lowest per capita rate of giving.

A common explanation for this, according to UUA staff member Vail Weller, is that we are civic-minded, and so we give to many causes beyond Unitarian Universalist community.

But she challenges people who say this to think about **where** they develop and sustain the values **inspiring** that generosity. And how do they expect those values to build power to change larger systems, if not in community that nourishes them?

This is a place where we engage with each other through relationships, not transactions.

So we actually have to talk about what we need from each other, and how much, and why. We need to **know** about each other **and** the world in order to move, collectively, in the right direction; we need to decide, together, what the right direction is... and it's often not the cheapest option!

The problem with market-based coordination is that by empowering people's individualism, it discourages deepening one-on-one relationships, and leveraging them. Markets enable people with privilege to survive without any conscious effort to care for the shared ground of being.

This is not what we've evolving for; we're made for something more wild and creative, connections that are both expansive and deep.

As the song goes, we were made for a *living* planet, circling a *living* star.

I've spent a lot of time studying climate change policy, and it's obvious that we must increase the price of things that harm the planet and pay reparations to those suffering the damage. But we lack the political will. So the people who benefit from painfully low prices get away with not cooperating, not paying their fair share, not showing up for their global community. And these people... well, they're us.

What I hope is that we can learn. It's not just about voting for the right law. It's also about showing up for our **local** communities, like this church. If we can learn to give money to the church, when we don't have to, and show up to meetings to decide how to spend it, then we will be building our collective capacity to transform our climate privilege into stewardship.

But it all starts with a conversation.

So I encourage you to connect with someone new-to-you in this congregation, and to reflect on what your connections here mean to you.

Our Pledge Fest next weekend is not just a fundraiser; it's celebration of what inspires us to support the church, a whole day of activities for body, spirit, and mind. And yeah, we'd like you to bring your pledge form if you haven't turned it in yet. That's the excuse for the festival... The church needs your financial support.

But the point is to be together, now and into the future.

So come, whether you just joined the congregation last week, or you're an old hat, or this is your first Sunday, or you're watching online and haven't yet stepped foot in our building. Come whether or not you have a potluck dish to share at dinner. Come, whatever the number is that you wrote down on your pledge form.

Do not let any obstacle prevent you from celebrating.

And if you have questions or want a personal invitation, talk to our amazing generosity team and Pledge Fest planners, Sunny, Frances, Cindy, Bonnie, who have tables in the back.

Mary Lou and Lannie also have a table, where you can ask about relational meetings and sign up to have one.

And don't forget our UU friends from out of town, who will be at coffee hour... ask them why they are trekking all over the country for Unitarian Universalism!

Financial planners will tell you that middle class Americans could double all their charitable giving and not notice any difference in their daily lives. This month is an opportunity for you to consider whether you are such a person.

Statistically, it's highly likely that you are. But maybe not; maybe you're someone whose life would *improve* markedly if you increased your charitable giving.

Maybe you're somebody whose established practices of connecting are due for a shift, in tune with the slogan for this year's pledge campaign: This Year Is Different.

But whatever your beat, we need your drumming. Whatever your tune, we need your humming. Whatever your ability, we need your support.

Please rise in body or spirit

and pour all your pent up energy into our final song,

Let It Be a Dance!

References

"Dance: It's only human," audio story on PRX. Feb 9, 2016.

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The quote, "you feel warm and cozy toward whoever is grooming you" is from scientist Robin Dunbar.

The quote about Whitehead's philosophy that "there is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes..." is from C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*. West Conshohocken:

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