

"The Mystery of Community Building"

Rev. Victoria Ingram

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

10 December 2023

Preparing this week's sermon, I went looking for the origins of the phrase, "May you live in interesting times." Popularly said to be one part of an ancient Chinese curse, there is very little evidence to indicate this is actually the case.

So whether it's a curse or a blessing, we've certainly lived with the impact of interesting times over the last few years. The challenges of COVID, a world at war, rising housing and food costs, climate change, social unrest, poverty, political upheaval - and on and on. And, there are blessings in there, as well - we've all adapted and picked up new coping skills. We've had to learn to live in different ways and make choices to protect our health and well-being.

All of us have had to absorb the reality of life's changes and adapt our lives to the realities we face now. Wishing and hoping for things to be different - to return perhaps to the storied "good old days" or that things will get "back to normal" - just isn't in the cards.

One of the things I think we have learned is how much we truly need one another. For us Unitarian Universalists, our understanding of the interconnected web has been enhanced by realizing just how important our friends are to us, how much we long to be together and share our lives with one another. Back in the days before COVID, perhaps we even got a bit complacent about how easy it was to see our people, to be involved in our communities, to have that all-important human interaction and connection.

Now, I think we know more about how precious it is to be able to be in relationship. To share a smile and make eye contact, to laugh together, to share a tender moment of deep connection, to sit silently in the company of others. It is good for the soul. It is good for us on so many levels.

And, I know that it's been challenging to be back on-line of necessity for these past couple of months. It's wonderful that we have this option, but, truly, it's nothing like being in the same space, sensing the people around us, breathing together, singing, sharing a hug or a handshake. I'm glad that we've created other options for being together, despite the fact that on Sundays we are online. I look forward to being back at OCI on a regular basis in January, as I'm sure you do, too.

Wherever humans are, there are communities. Groups of people who have gathered together for some mutual cause or benefit, to share a sense of belonging and build connections. To help one another. To celebrate and grieve. To listen to and share stories. To experience ourselves in relationship to others and feel as though we are a part of something bigger, something that offers

us a sense of visibility and safety and purpose. A place where we can explore what it means to be human in this interesting time.

Coming together as a faith community adds the dimension of putting our values into action together. In this place, we can identify the ways in which we would like to see change in the world, support each other in taking action to impact and shape that change, and offer encouragement for the work that needs to be done.

Comedian Amy Poehler tells us to "find a group of people who challenge and inspire you, spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life." I think that is what we hope for when we enter the doors of our congregation. We want to be with people who are committed to doing good work, who are open to change and transformation, and who celebrate growth and learning in themselves and others.

The greatest asset in building community is trust. Building and nurturing trust is at the heart of our faith and spiritual path as UUs. We are called to show up fully in the process and give our attention to what is meaningful in our interactions with one another. To choose to be vulnerable and honour the vulnerability of others as we consider our hopes and desires for the future of this church community and the larger world. We each make a commitment to our own spiritual growth and to a larger vision.

We all choose how to spend our time. We choose to come to church on Sunday mornings. We may be aware of why it is we do it for ourselves - to see our friends, to reset for the week ahead, for beautiful words and inspiring music, out of a sense of responsibility. Some of why we come serves ourselves, certainly, and that is to be expected.

But, do you ever think of why you come to church for everyone else? Believe it or not, it's not just for you! Can you imagine who else needs to know you are here today? Who needs to see your smile or hear your voice? Who need to be encouraged by seeing other people that share their values and care about the world? Who needs to hear your story or have you listen to theirs?

Being in community is foundational to our human experience. We are not simply individual organisms occupying a great petri dish of existence, independent of and separate from others. We are all in this together, which I think has been demonstrated and reinforced, over and over, in the preceding months. We need one another, now more than ever.

Putting ourselves in community is to risk change. If we are open minded and hearted, we will hear new ideas, learn about lives lived differently than our own, have our preconceived notions challenged, and have our eyes opened to new possibilities. All of these opportunities may lead us to realize that we have to change - to think in new ways, to consider other possibilities, to adjust the way we live in the world. It may even make us uncomfortable.

Ginni Rometty, a former IBM Exec, said that "someone once told me that growth and comfort do not coexist. And I think it's a really good thing to remember." Along with potential change comes potential moments of discomfort and uncertainty. You will survive being uncomfortable. And, by examining your discomfort, you can determine how to adjust your thinking or behavior to facilitate changes that are inevitably before you.

When we understand ourselves as part of a larger, interdependent circle of community, we realize how our contribution and engagement help bring that resource alive and make it functional. We identify ways in which we can serve the community - to achieve our goals, to make it a welcoming place for other souls seeking a community like ours, to make it work to meet the needs of all of the community members. We don't "volunteer" in our communities - we commit to perform acts of service because service is what makes a community whole, healthy, and vibrant.

We provide service when we greet new people who come into our circle. We provide service when we help with the activities that make being together enjoyable - making coffee, leading worship, singing, handling the website, attending an event or group, helping someone navigate the new or unfamiliar. We engage in service when we offer our skills and talents to benefit the larger community. It is an act of service to be kind, patient, respectful or courteous to one another.

We do live in interesting times, but really, who wants to live in boring times? Well, maybe just a bit less "interesting" would be refreshing! Fortunately, we have a community to help us navigate the rough seas and the gales of change. We have each other to encourage us, witness us, share with us, and work with us as we our mission, live our values, and demonstrate our faith.

The mystery of community building isn't in the actions we take when we are together. Rather, it's in the sense of belonging and connection created between us. It's in the transitions in our thinking, in the opening of our hearts, in the dawning of new possibilities, and in the rise of inspiration we gain from being in right relationship and covenant with one another. It's in the resilience we build as part of something larger than ourselves. This is the blessing that is possible from living consciously and contributing to each other's lives as a faith community.

Blessed be.