

**Community Care**  
Rev. Dr. Rita Capezzi  
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
Sunday, August 10, 2025

May we settle in with loving kindness in our hearts, extending it to all this beloved community we see here, and all beyond this moment. May loving kindness fill us and sustain us in all the beautiful and changeable times of our lives.

Perhaps you have heard of the town Roseto, Pennsylvania. It was a town settled by Italian immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A re-settlement, really, from a small town in Italy. People left for more opportunity—for work, for education, for a chance to own property. One typical migration story. But the difference here is that people left *en masse*, together purposefully, to recreate, in a sense, the community they already needed and valued, just with “more.” And the story goes, though the research has been questioned, the story goes that despite drinking a lot of wine and eating a lot of food high in fat, the people of Roseto died less frequently from myocardial infarctions—of heart attacks—than peers in other comparable towns. The people of Roseto were generally healthier, and in other ways, too. What was the secret to the success of this community?

Now remember, they all came from the same small town in Italy, where they had lived for generations. They shared history, deep knowledge of each other and each other’s families. They shared DNA. They shared a common life-style, including what they ate and how they communicated, how they played and worked, how they solved problems and how they grieved. Science has worked at the phenomenon from the perspective of what is provable: genes and common body attributes and similar levels of stress. In fact, as time went on and the people of Roseto became more “Americanized,” the rates of heart attack increased to match more typical levels. As they married outside the familial patterns and took different kinds of work, they had more heart attacks than in previous generations. Their bodies were changing, but so was the sense of cohesive community. As the community values changed—how they communicated, how they shared, how they solved problems, how they grieved—their health changed as well.

As I said, some of the scientific research is disputed, but what is not disputed is the sense of close community that sustained for many years the lives of the people of Roseto. Though each of us is valuable and important, we do not become ourselves in isolation. Being in community shapes us, just as our unique being shapes the community as we participate in it. In Roseto, the people were, in many ways, all the same. Same place of origin, with its history and limitations. Same levels of education and work skills. Same language and food and religious practices. Same expectations about what is meaningful in life. All this they shared. That homogeneity certainly made for constancy, a solid base for a strong community. Yet, when the people began to get more education and learn new work skills. When they learned English and found new foods in the supermarkets and discovered life outside of Roman Catholicism. When they married outside the town, people of different ethnicities and histories. When they

shared less, then their expectations about what it meant to lead a meaningful life began to change, and so did their health and well-being.

Roseto was an intentional community—transplanted intentionally, maintained as a homogeneous village for as long as was possible. The people needed change, but they needed a sense of stability as well. And then heterogeneity, variety, became inevitable, transforming individuals and the community itself.

Unitarian Universalist communities, this church included, are intentional communities too, but they are anything but homogeneous. We come out of many faith traditions and sometimes from no traditional religious practice at all. We come from different economic and educational backgrounds. We come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We come with different genders and forms of self-expression. We are mirrors, reflections of the very universe itself, full of diversity and differentiation, moving in life-giving and life-sustaining patterns. We are various, and unlike the co-creators of Roseto, intentionally so. What brings us together into Unitarian Universalist community is a longing for a community that gives us “more.” But we seek “more” not simply to remain the same. We come in search of purposeful and meaningful lives beyond most visible or scientifically definable similarities. We come to be transformed, to transform in community. We come to co-create a community that can transform us all.

We come with a yearning, often deep within us, sometimes inchoate and confusing. We come together in search of a place of belonging and caring, looking for something larger than ourselves, a calling, a hope for more. We desire a place of belonging and caring, with a belief in a shared purpose, a common yet precious resource that belongs to all of us, specifically when we share. Perhaps we come frightened, uncertain, looking for someone to show us compassion. Perhaps we come angry, thoughtless, looking for someone to show us acceptance. Perhaps we come troubled, lonely, looking for someone to show us commitment. Perhaps we come longing to learn: to care more fully, to give more whole-heartedly, to love more generously.

We come like beached starfish, needing a boy, a community, who ignores the conventional wisdom of the day, which does not defer to old ways of seeing and being. We come hopeful that someone will make a difference to us, that we can make a difference to someone else. We cannot save the world. We can act in saving ways within our community, expanding our community as we save. I have been saved by Unitarian Universalist community, by several communities, over and over again. I believe I have made a difference to individuals, too. To be a saving faith—to offer solace and companionship, to seek the truth in love, to hold space for the weary and the lost, to make the world better—this is the purpose of our communities, of this community. And living in such a way requires particular kinds of action.

I know you know this, in your weariness and your hope for your congregation. You have been in transition for so long, your beach, this beach, littered with gasping starfish in need of the waters of living together, proximate as Unitarians committed to a better world for all. It can seem that the effort to just keep going is so weighty—pulling against

the centrifugal forces that can pull you apart without a common space to gather. And this reality after the challenge of pandemic isolation—why do you all have to endure more Zoom life, when so few are still living that way! How difficult to keep the congregation alive, even in gratitude of Zoom and YouTube, when other neighboring, in-person communities pull on you, too, offering the solace of shared activity and shared values that feed your well-being and sense of belonging. How difficult to keep on in the reality of ministerial transition, without a single minister, all your own and committed to sustained relationship with you and this community. All we substitutes and guests love you and care for you, but we all know that robust shared ministry is something beyond, something deeper for which we and you long.

But you are here today, because you know that while that sack could be carried alone, what matters most would not come into being. You can engage in spiritual practices on your own, and I hope you do. You can arrange for companionship on your own. You can engage in justice action on your own. There are plenty of opportunities. And even when you are all free to gather again in a common space, so close you are to this and so far it seems, we can all get that tendency to act on our own. We might begin to feel that we know best how to arrange coffee hour. Or we alone can set a justice agenda that fully expresses the values of the congregation. Or we alone know that shape that worship ought to take. I say “we,” and I mean “me, too.” I have felt the pull of these tendencies that seek to build community but just might have the opposite effect.

Here, in this community, when we are living fully our values and principles, fully embracing the promise and the challenge of living at Unitarian Universalists, we come committed to sharing, “sharing the burden of a shopping bag or sack of laundry,” of creating together discussion space or voting space or grief space or justice action space. As we co-create, we stagger along, getting used to working together, moving in ways that allow us to gradually calibrate, as long as we include fully, with patience, “the uninitiated, or the impatient.” And as the co-creation of the more that we all desire becomes smoother, how we create what we create becomes “a kind of tether between us, [and] we modulate our pace, even our own sway and saunter—the good and sole rhythms we might swear we live by—to the one on the other side of the sack.”

We all need the care of a community, and we all need to care for the community. We are built up by our community, but only if we continue to build up the community that build us up. And so even in your weariness, even as the final stretch seems such a far one, even as the finish line seems to grow farther away even as it draws closer, call upon all—the god of your understanding, the knowledge of a diverse and interdependent and interconnected universe, the spirits of all your companions in this beautiful community. Call from within your deepest yearning for the community you need and the community you will work to co-create for the help “to be present with all that is our life, both our deepest sorrows and our greatest joys.” Call upon the surety of “how linked we are, how each one of our cares touches us all. that we may rest in the solace of one another’s love.” Help each other “to stick up for what is right, even when we are tired or afraid.” Help each other “to dream of the world as it should be and act to bring that world about.”

Help each other “to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, so that we might fully embody love and resist hatred.”

In Ross Gay’s amazing words, the co-creation of love is ultimate: “I suppose part of why I so adore the sack sharing is because most often this is a burden one or the other could manage just fine solo—which makes it different from dragging Granny’s armoire up two flights of steps, say, or wrestling free a truck stuck hip-deep in a snow bank. Yes, it’s the lack of necessity of this act that’s perhaps precisely why it delights me so. Everything that needs doing—getting the groceries or laundry home—would get done just fine without this meager collaboration. But the only thing that needs doing, without it, would not.”

May we continue to move together in the awkward dance that is loving, inclusive, diverse, willing. May we each be filled with the loving kindness that is our birthright, knowing our hearts as the sacred, holy places they truly are. May we extend that loving kindness to ourselves and to all in this beloved community, acting in love and amazing grace, seeking the wisdom in ourselves and each other, sharing stories and listening deeply to each other, sharing silence and feeling the power of our faith, in ourselves and among each other. And may we remember, always, why our beloved Unitarian Universalist communities are here: that together we may build this congregation in love for and service to a hurting world, so deeply in need of loving kindness. May it ever be so. And Amen.