

Betweenness
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I remember a choir director once said to me, “singing with others is the closest you can get to heaven on earth.”

It’s a bold statement, but so far I don’t have any evidence that she is wrong. I love singing, and singing with others might have been the first place I felt that sacred “betweenness” Rabbi Schulweis writes about. A connectedness to those around you, an acceptance of their humanity. Maybe you have felt that betweenness too.

One thing I think people often don’t realize about being a musician is that it is a very solitary life. This seems to be a mix of external and internal factors; it’s a craft that requires many hours practicing alone, but it also seems to attract people that are okay with that.

It is counterintuitive because music feels so relational or implicitly social. Still, most musicians I’ve known are quite introverted, contrary to the extroversion that may emerge on stage.

As I’ve moved away from music towards ministry, parallels between the two have begun to show themselves. In this case, solitude.

Solitude is an often encouraged spiritual discipline for those wanting to deepen their religious life. Learning this in seminary, I had to laugh because one of the things I found most difficult about being a musician is the amount of time I had to spend alone. Remembering some of my most challenging and stressful seasons, my way of coping with that stress would often be to withdraw further; instead of doing the thing that would actually make me feel better (spending some non-work-related time with a non-work-related friend), I dug my heels in and spent even *more* time alone because I was just that disciplined.

It is true that solitude has a shadow side. While there is certainly value in solitary reflection, meditation, and prayer, what is faith without community? I believe this is what Schulweis meant by “God known/not alone/but in relationship”. While many different religions have a form of monasticism and encourage spending time by oneself in thought or prayer, there is often still a connection to a community, even if it is a cloistered one. For example, in many

Buddhist traditions, taking refuge in the sangha (the spiritual community) is necessary for enlightenment.

Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams writes, “we belong to a cosmos that is social. Only the despairing nihilist has lost the sense of belonging to it.” (96). In other words, finding belonging is linked to finding meaning.

A key part of Adams’ theology was what he called “voluntary associations” which, as it sounds, are groups which you choose to be a part of, as opposed to simply being born into like a birth family or a political state. The work of religious voluntary associations (also known as congregations) happens both within and beyond their doors; these voluntary associations are responsible for caring for and encouraging growth within their members while also using their organizational strength to better the world and fight for justice. Adams described this as “the organization of power and the power of organization”.

He saw religion as a collective activity for emotional and spiritual reasons as well as practical ones. You may have heard the “choir analogy” applied to social justice movements; the premise is that, individually, one chorister can only hold a note for so long before needing to breathe, but collectively, a choir can trade off breathing and comfortably sustain a note for much, much longer. Congregations require a similar collaborative spirit to sustain themselves.

There is an important element of choice and self-determination in this voluntary association idea. Perhaps it even resonates with some of us who were not born into Unitarian Universalist families. We found this faith, and we chose it. There is sanctity in that choice.

Rabbi Schulweis himself has challenged the idea of a chosen people in favour of a “choosing” people; he argues that it’s not that God chose a singular group of people as *his* people, but rather that as people of faith, we *choose* to live in a certain way.

As Adams’ suggests, it also means we choose each other. We chose to be a part of our congregations; we didn’t inherit them or have them forced upon us, we chose them.

Choosing to be together also involves choosing *how* to be together. This is an important part of our Unitarian Universalist religious identity, articulated through our congregational covenants.

We have some of our ancestors in faith to thank for this, namely the 16th century Christian reformers, who felt that a religious community should be created and governed by its people instead of being ruled by a larger church's bishops, priests, and traditions. Instead of all consenting to a set of beliefs, these ancestors were more interested in democratic processes and agreeing on how to be with one another as a community.

As we UUs moved further and further away from our Christian beginnings, this lack of creed became even more important to us and is very much alive today. When we talk about being a covenantal faith, that is what we mean.

Every congregation's covenant is unique. If you look them up or go to other UU congregations in other places, you'll notice similarities and also differences. Many congregations include their covenant in their services, like you do here at First.

Maybe certain parts of the covenant resonate with you more than others, maybe that changes week to week. Maybe there is language that feels distant, maybe words like "doctrine" and "sacrament" carry certain connotations for you. Maybe the ideals and aspirations described feel abstract and hard to define.

It's true that growing with a text, repeating and revisiting it regularly, deepens your relationship with it. With time, the intangible becomes tangible. You consider and reconsider this text, this covenant. You learn what it means to others, and that changes what it means to you. It moves among you. Eventually, what it means to how you live and act bubbles to the surface.

I think of congregational covenants as a kind of UU scripture. An example of the divine at work in our communities as a "choosing" people. Together, we articulate what is important to us, who we want to be, what we stand for.

These are our words to live by, collaboratively and carefully constructed.

It also just feels very UU to me that instead of our scripture coming from an apostle or a prophet, it comes from a committee.

Early in my life as a UU, the concept of a congregational covenant played an important role in how I began to form my own understanding of a higher power. I would think about the covenants in the Bible, and how God is front and centre in all those stories. Our covenants

seemed to noticeably lack God, or so my teenage brain thought. Like many UUs before me, I was getting caught up on the G word itself.

In his essay “The Love of God”, Adams suggests that the creative, redemptive power of love *is* God and that the purpose of religious community was indeed to follow and learn from this vast, divine love. He also felt that this creative, redemptive power manifested itself through devotion, through caring for ourselves and others, through letting our passions and strengths guide us toward creating a better world.

We can probably all think of someone or something that we feel utterly devoted to. It might be a person, a partner or a child, or maybe it’s a passion, a talent, a life’s work, a gift that you share.

I am reminded of the words your community speaks into truth every week: “Love is our doctrine”. This devotion is alive in our congregations too; it is a guiding, activating love that shapes the work of our communities.

We are practiced at being together. This is a practice borne of intention as well as time. Recently, a friend of mine, a fellow seminarian, taught me about the history of Passing the Peace, a standard component of United and Anglican worship services, among others.

Our own practice of greeting our neighbours is very likely descended from this ritual. In our congregations as well as theirs, this is a moment to stand and wave to a friend across the room, offer a hug to your neighbour, maybe a handshake if you’ve never met before.

Interestingly, this is actually a very old ritual performed by the earliest Christians, perhaps even before they called themselves that. As described in the Gospel of Matthew, it was intended to be a time to reconcile any conflict or harm done between community members so that they may go before the altar without resentment or hurt.

Our ancestors know it as well as we do; there will always be challenges, disagreements, misunderstandings. Overcoming discord and repairing hurt requires intentionality on both an individual and a collective level. This intentionality is its own kind of spiritual practice, and like any practice, it requires regular repetition.

Reverend Jane Ellen Mauldin writes about everyday relationships as a spiritual practice; in her busy life working as a minister while also parenting young children, she found a way to

incorporate core tenets of Buddhist meditation practices to both the mundane and overwhelming motions of everyday life.

She embraced an awareness of and appreciation for the present moment, like taking one more second to look at the sunset, or truly enjoying the taste of her morning coffee. This is not a big ask when it comes to the more pleasant things in life, but it includes the unpleasant things too, like staying in the moment when you'd rather be somewhere else.

While this practice refers to one's relationship to one's self, it overlaps with two practices she cultivates in her relationships to others; commitment, and detaching from attachment. The latter refers to detaching from your expectations; life won't always go as you expect and people won't always do what you want, and that is okay. Despite the uncertainty of it all, you commit to caring about people. You commit to being present.

Reverend Mauldin accounts for the bad times as well as the good, as did our ancient proto-Christian ancestors. Like us, they created rituals and practices to address mistakes we will inevitably make.

We practice being together intentionally and thoughtfully within these walls but what about beyond them? We create these somewhat controlled test environments, and in my experience, the test is often successful; not always, but often, our congregations can persevere through times of strife, both big and small. While nothing is perfect, we consistently navigate the beautiful complexity of community. So what does taking those skills outside the congregation look like? How do we put all this practice to good use?

The ability to listen through difference is a real strength of ours, and the possible applications of this skill are numerous. Still, while it is easy to see the divine light in the baby that is smiling at you in the security line, it becomes more difficult when that baby has been screaming for two hours as you all wonder if your flight is ever going to board.

No big deal, you think. You've taken Reverend Mauldin's advice; you're staying present, you're appreciating life and all its imperfections. Alas, I'm afraid it is not always that easy!

A complicated side-effect of being a cis-passing non-binary person is that people will sometimes share their opinions about trans people with me without realizing I am also trans. As you might imagine, these are often not the most progressive or open-minded opinions.

In a younger, feistier season of life, my default response in situations like this would be anger; I would tell the person they were being hateful, explain all the ways in which their beliefs were wrong and damaging. Inevitably, I would just get more frustrated as they proved that their mind was made up and me stomping my feet in front of them wasn't going to make a difference.

Yes, anger can be useful in the face of injustice. It can fuel the fire of change. But at other times, it can be exhausting and disheartening. You're just a lone chorister without your choir, no one there to keep the note going.

In the last couple years, I've been trying a new strategy when I find myself in conversations like this; I try listening and answering their questions about my experience honestly. I ask them how they came to their conclusions, and I do my best to understand. Crucially, I have no investment in trying to change their minds.

Often, I'll learn that as far as they know, they have never met a trans person before, let alone talked to one. It becomes clear that this is just a person who is not doing what I want or expect, but that I absolutely must care about them anyway. They most certainly have their own devotions, people and things they love, gifts they hopefully use to better their corner of the world.

This isn't about taking the highroad, and it definitely isn't about winning a debate. It is about listening and trying to understand a perspective so immensely different from your own. It is about allowing for the discomfort of difference, and being committed to sticking around despite that discomfort.

Connecting is not always easy, but in my experience, it is almost always worth the effort. To see and be seen, to know and be known. That is that glorious betweenness. That "heaven on earth". The divine not in you nor in me, but between us.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection