

“To Kindle One Flame”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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We would probably make lousy Mennonites. We would probably make lousy Amish. We would probably huff and puff and blow ourselves away if we tried to emulate the communal silence of a Quaker Meeting House. I do believe we are Unitarian in practice and Universalist in aspiration. That is, we get gold stars for being staunch Unitarians, for holding up the ideals and walking the talk of individual conscience, individual liberties, individual beliefs, etc. We get slightly tarnished silver stars for walking the talk of Universalism, for being in community across differences, for staying with community beyond conflict, for placing the common good above our personal preference.

We want to be in community; we really do. It's just not easy. It's kind of like what we experience if we're the eldest child in our family and another one or two come along. We get excited about the idea – a new baby! A new toy! Until the baby arrives, and alas, a coup has taken place; we're supposed to share the throne – not the kind of chair designed for a group! Yet we're in this predicament called family, so sooner or later we discover that it's in our best interests to get along with this new arrival, to share our toys even.

During one of my first conversations with your Search Committee, I asked: “How is it that this congregation has gone through such a roller-coaster of changes over the past several years, and you keep coming back? Why?” And one of you responded with split-second timing, “Community! I love the community that I experience at First Parish!” The rest of the committee nodded readily in agreement.

Community – the intention, the hope, the experience, the gratification – is so at the center of our congregational life. And it's such a struggle when we're making a big decision – how and when to renovate, what kind of religious education experiences we want for our children, what we'll stand by as the mission of this church, whether and how we'll launch the tough stuff of justice making, whether and how we'll continue to advocate fair share giving. All these are matters with which we struggle mightily, and our biggest challenge is to stay in the circle, to stay in the extended family circle that is this church when it's so easy to bolt and run. Why do we stay? Community!

Sometimes it's the small stuff that rankles us most – how we'll arrange the furniture, what color we'll paint whatever, the signage outside the Meeting House, and yes, whether we have received a proper thank you for the most recent surge of energy we've expended on behalf of First Parish. We debate, we contend, we disagree, and our 286-year-old history tells us that as an institution, we have for the long term agreed to live with our differences, to make decisions, to stick it out, to move ahead.

It's not unlike what some of us have done in our families – with our spouses or partners. If a couple tells me they've never had a fight, I wonder if they live together. Can we guess that the big tussles are over kids and money? And the little tussles that catapult into big blow-outs are over how one squeezes that precious tube of toothpaste. It's not so different from our congregational life.

“Gather the spirit, harvest the power.
Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame,”

we sang at the outset of this morning's ingathering.

By then Mary Parker had kindled the one flame of our chalice. We were gathering in. We were moving into our communal worship, our sacred time together. We were letting go of our separate fires, sharing the radiance of the chalice flame that illumines us all. Soon after, I was kindling the one flame of joys and concerns spoken and unspoken. Separate fires, multiple voices, one flame.

“We humans want to be together,” claims Margaret Wheatley. “We only isolate ourselves when we’re hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state.... Truly connecting with another human being gives us joy.”

Being together, staying together, gives us joy. Connecting in community doesn’t mean we agree on everything. Far from it. I do believe those of us who call ourselves Unitarian Universalist have a short fuse for boredom. Too many nods of assent and we fall asleep. We also have a short fuse for discord. After all, were Thoreau and Emerson and Alcott from Concord, Massachusetts? Of course not, they were from Concord. Did they all just sit around their living rooms and Meeting Houses and nod their heads in benign assent? Of course not, they were Unitarian.

The faith that we practice and the faith to which we aspire offers us an exquisite balance. We bring our separate fires. We kindle one flame. We voice our distinct opinions. We close our mouths and open our ears; we listen. We teach and we learn.

The community that we practice – and it does take practice – is not a puree, rather a beloved texture of difference, different opinions, different needs, different hopes, different habits, each enriching the gathering that we know this morning in this Meeting House.

Francis David spoke as court preacher amid the reign of the only Unitarian king in history, King John Sigismund of Transylvania. “We need not think alike to love alike,” David proclaimed. It was the late 16th century. The Protestant Reformation had taken root in the remote villages of Transylvania, now part of Romania. However remote, there were a number of religious beliefs represented here. In 1568 King John issued the Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience. Yes, freedom of religion was a reality, however short-lived, long before Roger Williams made it so in the colony of Rhode Island. Francis David spoke with hard-won experience. Moving from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism, he had found his faith home in Unitarianism and a safe faith home it was as long as King John held power. Unfortunately, the policy of tolerance died along with King John, and poor Francis ended up perishing in a Transylvanian prison.

“We need not think alike to love alike” has not been a winner in most of history’s policy popularity contests. Yet here it is this morning alive in this Meeting House, in our separate fires, in our singular flame.

What is the secret to honoring those fires, to sustaining one flame? No secret really. As we enter this Meeting House, as we stand on the threshold of this new year, we are each invited to know in our souls that we can be part of a larger whole. We are each invited to remember that the whole is always larger and more amazing than the sum of its parts.

What does it take to make a Meeting House a Meeting Home, where each can feel at home? What does it take to form a congregation into religious community? What does it take for us to live the faith that kindling one flame is worth it? You know. I believe that you know. Let’s go forward into the year and be what we know and do what we know.

I love you, each and all. Shine on! Amen.

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