

## *Making Relationships Last / Relationship Resilience*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
February 12, 2017  
Rev. Paul Beckel

### **WELCOME**

Crocuses are in bloom. Schools might even be back in session tomorrow. Each day this week the days will be longer by 3-4 minutes. And that pace will continue to accelerate. Friskiness and fertility will abound around us. And then... I don't want to depress you, but, as always, all of that will come to an end—for a while—until it returns, and so on....

We pass through seasons and years, rising and falling fortunes, and a countless array of relationships. Some that will weather the transitions, some that will not, some that were never intended to last.

Let us call today upon the spirit of life though which we are all related. May we be conscious of, and grateful for the capacity we have to participate in relationships with one another, with friends and neighbors, with lovers, children, and animals... with our many interwoven communities, and the entire natural world... with the ancestors, and the generations to come... with whom we say: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship ...*

**GATHERING SONG**                      *Morning has Come*                      #1000

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**                      *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*                      Shel Silverstein

**CHILDREN'S CHOIR**                      *Take Care*

### **CHILDREN'S BLESSING**

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS**

**ERACISM MINUTE**                      Elizabeth Skinner

**READING**                                      Peggy Tabor Millin, in *Mary's Way*

I was on a train on a rainy day. The train was slowing down to pull into a station. For some reason I become intent on watching the raindrops on the window. Two separate drops, pushed by the wind, merged into one for a moment and then divided again — each carrying with it a part of the other. Simply by that momentary touching, neither was what it had been before. And as each one went on to touch other raindrops, it shared not only itself, but what it had gleaned from the other. I saw this metaphor many years ago and it is one of my most vivid memories.

I realized then that we never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace. Our state of being matters to those around us, so we need to become conscious of what we unintentionally share so we can learn to share with intention.

### **MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)**

**WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE**                      *Love Like Breathing*

### **MESSAGE**

Does it really matter if relationships last? When I preach about *mindfulness* the idea is that we can live in the moment, savoring what we have *now*—or, *who* we have now. And if savoring is not in the cards, then at least

we should be *dealing with* what we have now, dealing with *who* we have now. So from this mindfulness perspective, taking life moment by moment, how *long* a relationship lasts might seem beside the point.

And when I've preached about grief, about the loss of a loved one, I've stated that love is never wasted. It's not a mistake to love and to cherish ... though it hurts when a relationship ends or loved one dies ... that loss and the hole that it puts in our heart, does not make what we had any less wonderful. A relationship does not have to last forever in order to be exquisite.

I've also preached about self-respect and boundaries—because I've known people in abusive relationships which, if they cannot turn around very quickly, certainly *should not* last. As a child it was made plain to me that when you get married you *stay* married, no matter what. So it wasn't pretty when, in my early 20's, after having been married for just a few years, I got divorced. On the bright side, I was kind of a trailblazer in my family. Even though I'm the youngest, after my divorce: boom boom boom ... my next three older siblings got divorced within a few years. And this was not a bad thing. So: what God has joined no man may cast asunder?—I'm no longer wedded to that archaic patriarchal morality.

I am wedded, though. Jane and I will be celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this summer. I say this not because I think that she and I are models of relationship excellence. But I will say that it feels good, and it's empowering. In a lot of cases, a good argument can be made for quality over quantity. But quantity has its benefits.

In her book, *It's better to be over the Hill than Under It*, Eda LeShan writes:

*Visiting someone in a hospital recently, I watched an elderly couple. The man was in a wheelchair, his wife sitting next to him in.... For the half-hour that I watched they never exchanged a word, just held hands and looked at each other, and once or twice the man patted his wife's face. The feeling of love was so thick in that room that I felt I was sharing in their communion and was shaken all day by their pain, their love, something sad and also joyful: the fullness of a human relationship.*

And yet you may remember last week I referred to a study of changing family norms which included the observation that divorce was less common 150 years ago, but that might have something to do with the fact that couples, back then, rarely faced the prospect of spending 60+ years with the same person. I'm reminded of the not very romantic picture of *Heaven*, as depicted by the Talking Heads:

*When this kiss is over  
It will start again  
It will not be any different  
It will be exactly the same*

*It's hard to imagine  
That nothing at all  
Could be so exciting  
Could be this much fun*

*Heaven  
Heaven is a place  
A place where nothing  
Nothing ever happens*

For better or for worse, though, most relationships do not suffer such heavenly monotony. If they did we would have no need for resilience. And also no capacity for resilience, which we discover, ordinarily, in times of adversity.

So far I've been primarily alluding to romantic relationships. But resilience, of course, is crucial as well in relationships between parents and children, between friends, co-workers, and members of a congregation. Every one of these, of course, face change, adversity, and disappointment.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, in *When all you've ever wanted isn't Enough*: [adapted]

*I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children ... playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle by the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.*

*I realized, then, that all of the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Sooner or later, a wave will come along and knock down what we have worked build up, perhaps over the course of our entire lives.*

*I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened. But they surprised me. They ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.*

Perhaps you know of a relationship like that. Full of joy and shared purpose.

Perhaps you know of a relationship, or you are in a relationship, that is resilient for other reasons. For example, in times of trauma coming from external sources—you don't turn your distress on each other, but give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Perhaps you've seen relationships like the one in *The Missing Piece meets the Big O*—made strong and flexible by each party taking responsibility for their own needs.

Or maybe you know the experience represented in the reading earlier about the raindrops—and your wide web of relationships has benefited from your awareness of the impact you have on everyone you touch.

Of course awareness of self is stronger in combination with a deep awareness of others, as described in this Hassidic tale about a rabbi

*...unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the disciple exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The ancient teacher looked up from his books as asked his fervent disciple, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?" The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stuttered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions". "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant," retorted the rabbi. "For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"*  
[Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*]

So I've mentioned several aspects of relationships that can respond flexibly to stress and changing circumstances. Characteristics like joy and shared purpose, giving one another the benefit of the doubt, autonomy, self-awareness, and being tuned-in to each other's needs and fears.

If we're lucky, or if we've made a concerted effort to learn how to foster these traits, our relationships will have several of these tools available—so when one tool is not enough to endure a particular type of stress, there will be others to fall back upon.

Which brings us to *external* support, another strength that resilient relationships will often take advantage of. You might not know it, but my relationship with you is more resilient because I have supportive colleagues—both Unitarian Universalists all around the country, and those of diverse faiths here in town.

Those nearby, our local interfaith clergy group, recently created the heart logo which you saw up on the screen briefly after the children's story. Inside the heart are rainbow colored hands reaching upward together. And the text around the heart is "Let Love be our Legacy...We're all in this together...Whatcom county faith communities."

You may have seen this on yard signs around town, on bumper stickers and t-shirts, and big banners ... at the pride festival, the post-inaugural women's march, the recent rally at the border in response to the anti-Muslim immigration ban, and yesterday's rally in support of Planned Parenthood. I appreciate this group not only as a form of external support, but as another whole set of resilient relationships that do not depend upon conformity to a particular creed.

Which brings me to one final story:

*A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?" His father answered, "If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong. I can't do it." His father placed his arm around the boy's shoulder and said, "No... you didn't use all your strength – you didn't ask me to help."*

[David Wolpe, *Teaching your children about God*]

In our resilient relationships, then, whatever their strengths and challenges, we recognize ourselves within a larger context, the inescapably relational web of all existence. This web can be a cushion, within which our autonomous relationships glide. Or it can be a higher purpose, to which our healthy relationships contribute.

So as we go now again to face the world, may the strength and flexibility of our interdependent relationships sustain us through the seasons of giving and receiving,—like breathing, in and out—the power of love.

**SEJC COLLECTION** for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services

**SENDING SONG**

*Answering the Call of Love* #1014

At Coffee Hour: Share a story about a relationship you admire