

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST  
CONGREGATION OF CASTINE**  
November 12, 2017

*"A community is made up of people who enjoy and are ready to participate in mutual helpfulness." Harry C. Meserve*

"Ready to Participate"

READINGS

~ from a sermon: "Community and the Individual" in *About Community* by Harry C. Meserve. Ellsworth: Downeast Graphics and Printing, Inc., 1998.

A community is made up of people who enjoy and are ready to participate in mutual helpfulness. Not that they are busybodies always prying into one another's affairs. They are not conscious "do-gooders," but they know how to be helpful without making a big thing of it.(p. 27)

~ from *Community, The Structure of Belonging* by Peter Block. San Francisco: Berrett-Koeler Publishers, Inc., 2008.

Community ... is about the experience of belonging. We are in community each time we find a place where we belong. .... To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends. (from the Welcome)

SERMON

*Hello Roger? This is Susan. I'm calling to ask if Jennifer might be available on Tuesday after school until about 5:15 to come play with Emily. It's been too long since the girls have seen each other. Ok, well, let me know. Thanks.*

Does anyone remember the time before parents arranged play dates for their kids? If we didn't arrange our own play time and make our own friends, then certainly my mother and dad were not going to do it for us. And beyond that little factoid, my parents didn't worry about the safety of their kids like parents today need to worry. What's happened to the time when kids walked home or got off the bus and met up with whoever was

outside and made their own fun and entertainment between the bus stop and gotta be home for dinner?

I don't want to be overly nostalgic about a by-gone era when families lived in neighborhoods and everybody more-or-less knew everybody else. There is no time in our past that was better for the majority of people than now. But, it did seem that during my growing up years, people felt that they were part of a community. Have we lost that sense of community in our modern, or post-modern, technology and schedule driven lives?

Our two wisdom teachers this morning, Peter Block and Harry Meserve, have a lot to say about community. Each has written a book on community. Peter Block is a management and organizational development consultant and his book reads a lot like a dense instructional business tome. There are, I admit, things I don't miss about the corporate world. Harry Meserve's book is really a collection of sermons – many of them delivered right here, I think – and is much easier to read. These two men are very different, and yet, each has something important to share with us about community.

Our lives have become so individualized that we've become separated from each other. There is little structure that holds us together. We find that we live in isolation and to remedy that feeling, we arrange play dates for ourselves and our kids.

Let me begin where Peter Block begins. Belonging. The first most essential aspect of community is that members of the community belong, and they really feel that sense of belonging. He says that "we are in community each time we find a place where we belong. .... To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends." Belonging is also about ownership. 'This community belongs to me' is just as vital a statement as is 'I belong to this community'. To belong, he says, is "to act as creator and co-owner of the community." We care for, we nurture, and we protect that which is precious.

Listen now to Harry Meserve.

*Community is a condition  
where one is accepted and accepts,  
where one is needed and supported,  
where one loves and is loved,  
where one sorrows and hopes,  
where beyond all confusions  
we see the star.*

This is a preacher's heart reflecting back to us what we know and cannot always hold on to. To see the star is to belong; to each other – yes. And more than that. We belong to all that is. To belong in this way is also to take part in the very act of creating and breathing into existence. We are ready to participate in mutual helpfulness. Not because we must, but because we can and we will.

Five characteristics of community are necessary: a sense of place, shared values and toleration of variety, mutual helpfulness, shared tradition, and a common language. Well, Harry Meserve goes on in five sermons and I commend them to you. I shall take this moment as my jumping off place.

Our liberal religious tradition preaches freedom, reason and tolerance. It also preaches universal love. This foundation of our faith is solid and will support us in creating and living within this community.

Why do we reach for community so insistently? It is part of the human condition to seek the company of others. Despite the radical devotion to individual rights and freedoms that prevails in our nation today, we are not separate beings. We are communal beings. Belonging. It comes back to that. Without any sense of belonging we are lost. We see how devastating the loss of belonging can be for people. We need a place where we belong. We need to surround ourselves with shared experience. It is here that Harry Meserve calls us to our responsibility to come together ready to participate. Community is not something that the universe does to us. Community is something that we have only when we show up and engage

with each other in all kinds of ways. We might think about the thousands of random acts of kindness that we see every day. People helping people just because that's what we do for and with each other.

We are at our collective best, I suggest, when things are difficult. Harry tells a story about a jib sail that let loose from its fixtures in a big wind storm and threatened to fly off the sailboat, safely moored in the inner harbor. He wondered what to do, but as he said,

*I did not really want to go out in that kind of wind in a 10-foot dinghy and try to do it myself. So we worried all day until late afternoon, when I went down to the harbor to see what had happened and saw that the jib had been taken down and safely lashed to the deck out of all danger of breaking loose. I wondered who did it. I asked several people who live on the harbor. They said no, but that had noticed somebody out there. It was several days later when, after careful questioning, I found out who it was: a man I hardly know. I called to thank him, and he said, "I was out there fixing my own mooring and saw it, so I did it. Is it OK?"*

And that, is community. Nothing fancy. Nothing to brag about or regard as all that astonishing. We show up, ready to participate in making our community strong and loving and sheltering in a storm. Last week, when we had our own big blow, people were all over the place helping out where they could in both big and small ways. Random acts of kindness? Sure. But maybe more so, acts of community.

Both Peter Block and Harry Meserve say that community starts best when it is small and close to home. This makes sense; we begin where we are, doing the very best we can where we are.

We are a community here in this congregation. We belong – formally and informally – both are real. We take care of ourselves and each other. We enjoy the five characteristics of community: a sense of place, shared values and toleration of variety, mutual helpfulness, shared tradition, and a common language. This faith community is precious. We didn't start it, but we are now its caretakers and we will do our best to be sure it remains

strong and welcoming for those who are yet to arrive here. We cannot take it for granted. Each of us has a role to play in giving life to this community. What is required is that we come prepared to participate – fully and honestly and consistently. We are amazing. We can do great things together. We keep each other going in times of triumph and in times of stress or loss.

It seems that our nation is suffering a loss of community. We do not know each other very well. We do not always trust each other to do the right thing, or even agree on what the right thing is. We are divided and have taken up positions of both offense and defense. We seek to blame; sometimes to shame. We seek retribution. There are a thousand ways to weaken and destroy community. It seems as though we are determined to throw our neighbors under the bus in order to be right or rich or just free to be who we want to be.

Friends, I don't have an antidote to this sickness that holds us in its grip. You may not either. Yet, that is no reason to despair or to give up. Religion has the power to both harm and to heal. It is we who decide how to use our faith. We start with what we know. We know universal love. We know the worth and dignity of all beings. We know kindness. We know shared values. We share a history, differently interpreted for sure, but shared nonetheless. These are the ingredients of community. Put to good use, we may yet come together as neighbors working for the good of all. I don't know. But there are signs of hope. Let's not lose sight of what is good and true and strong in our neighbors. They love their local community, just as we love ours. Maybe we begin there. In our own communities and make them as strong and welcoming and inclusive as possible.

As the ancient sage teaches us ... if you want community in the world, begin with your own heart and your own family and your own congregation. We can do this. Then, maybe, we can do more.

May we be encouraged by the great tradition of universal religion and the One Love we are given to share with the world.

**I will end where Harry Meserve ends... words of Rebecca Ann Parker who writes Choose to Bless the World.**

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,  
a moving forward into the world  
with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition,  
a confession of surprise,  
a grateful acknowledgment  
that in the midst of a broken world  
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness  
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil  
there moves a holy disturbance,  
a benevolent rage,  
a revolutionary love,  
protesting, urging, insisting  
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life  
as a gesture of thanks  
for this beauty  
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude  
to search for the sources  
of power and grace;  
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,  
the endeavor shared,  
the heritage passed on,  
the companionship of struggle,  
the importance of keeping faith,

the life of ritual and praise,  
the comfort of human friendship,  
the company of earth  
the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.  
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

**Blessed Be. I Love You. Amen.**