

**“Belonging to Each Other”**  
**October 20th, 2019**  
**Rev. Laurel Gray**

It takes courage to stand alone, but it also takes courage to stand together, to say yes and lean into community. It takes vulnerability and commitment and patience, but it also takes finding our center together. If you remember, last time I shared that the word courage means to live from one’s center. We reflected on how we do that individually, but today I’d like to reflect on how we do that together, as a community.

On my very first Sunday here, in August when we were still having summer services in the chapel, I shared a poem with you called “ministry is what we do together.” It’s an idea that feels so true to me, and yet is sometimes overlooked in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. But in truth, the minister is not the only one doing ministry – I am not the only one doing ministry. To minister means to tend to the needs of others. You all do that when you sit on committees and teach Sunday school and set up coffee hour and check in when you notice someone’s missing from church. A minister does not make a congregation – we can certainly do a lot of good, and in some cases a lot of harm – but we are not the congregation. You are.

On that Sunday in August, instead of giving a sermon, I asked you all to share why you loved this place, what you do to contribute, and what keeps you coming back. The most striking and beautiful thing, which so many of you said, was “these are my people.” Or “this place is family.” In short, you belong to each other.

The Reverend Leslie Takahashi serves the UU congregation in Mount Diablo, California, and she talks about the challenge of being in community, because we will, at some point, disappoint each other. Despite our high ideals and love for each other, we are, in fact, human.

So when Rev. Takahashi meets with newcomers who are thinking about joining her congregation, she names this specifically. She tells them that there will almost surely be a moment when they feel hurt or disappointed by her or the congregation, and she asks them, when confronted by that moment, not to just walk away, not to disappear quietly or in a huff. Because community is not made of only the good or joyful parts of life.

We are all fallible, and the more we care, the more it can hurt when we feel a person or a group has let us down. But being each other's people means we don't leave without looking back. Yes, there will be times in life when we do need to separate ourselves from a person, a group, or even a congregation for reasons of physical or emotional safety – and I want to affirm that that is a good and necessary thing to do. But what Rev. Takahashi is talking about is something different. She's talking about leaving simply because we're uncomfortable, because we had some kind of disagreement or are holding a grudge. Belonging to each other runs deeper than that, it asks more of us than that.

So how do we do this thing of community together? How do we do it well, how do we say yes, how do we tend to our collective center?

In her work, which we started talking about last time, Brené Brown talks a lot about trust. She describes trust as being like marbles in a jar – little

by little we add or remove trust marbles from the jar. It's not something static, something we have or don't have. It's ever changing and we can be intentional about how we add marbles to our communal trust jar.

In a few of her books, Brown talks about what she calls the “Anatomy of Trust” and uses the acronym Braving to cover the seven key components of trust. You have a copy of this in your order of service – feel free to take it home, put it on your fridge, or tack it up at work.

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to affirm the worth and dignity of all people, the first principle, and to affirm the interconnectedness of life, the seventh principle. But those can be pretty abstract concepts – how, in practice, do we affirm each other's dignity and tend well to our connections?

I think this anatomy of trust is a pretty good roadmap for how to do both. In her writing about the anatomy of trust, Brown says these seven components of trust apply both to our self-trust and our building trust with others. I invite you to think about how these different components of trust show up in your own life and in this congregation. Where are we consistently adding marbles to the trust jar, and where do we have work to do?

The first part of the anatomy of trust is:

**Boundaries** – You respect my boundaries, and when you're not clear about what's okay and not okay, you ask. You're willing to say no.

There is now (or will be) a glass window in the door to my office. This is now standard protocol for minister's offices, because of the history of

misconduct happening behind closed doors. As part of our formation, ministers are now required to go through extensive ethics training about keeping good boundaries, so that we can foster trusting, caring environments in our congregations.

We are not allowed to have personal or romantic relationships with congregants because they are boundary violations that hurt both the individual and the congregation. Our relationship with a congregation is by definition non-reciprocal because of the the power vested in us as ministers vested in us as ministers. There is space between the collective work of ministry and the role of the minister. In the same way that relationships with therapists, doctors, and teachers are non-reciprocal - the caregiver does not receive care back. To do so would be a violation of the relationship. There is a difference between the shared work of ministry and the particular role of the minister. And when ministers fail to keep this boundary, we damage the trust of the whole body.

**Two: Reliability** – You do what you say you’ll do. This means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so you don’t overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

I’ll confess that this one is proving trickier than expected for me this year. I work  $\frac{3}{4}$  time and am still navigating what that means I can and cannot accomplish. Perhaps you’ve noticed that I don’t answer emails particularly quickly – this is a side effect of my trying to balance competing time priorities. Things to work on.

**Next: Accountability** – You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

Here's the gift of our commitment to inherent worth – we are committed to the idea that our worth is not determined by our actions, and so there is no shame – no sense that something is wrong with us – when we mess up. Half of our theological lineage is Universalism, the idea that no one is damned, that no one is outside the circle of love and connection. This isn't a lack of accountability, an anything goes kind of theology – it's a call towards accountability, because we've never transgressed so severely that we're a lost cause and therefore are no longer worth holding accountable. No. In this house, we can own our mistakes because we will not be defined by them.

**Vault** – You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept, and that you're not sharing with me any information about other people that should be confidential.

I know many of you in the room are therapists and psychiatrists, doctors and professors and lawyers, so I'm sure confidentiality is a familiar concept.

This goes for all of you when you come to speak to me. I will not share anything you tell me, unless you specifically ask me to – like in the case of asking me to light a candle of joy or sorrow in your absence. In addition to the window in my door, there is also now a sound machine outside my office so that what you share in confidence cannot be overheard.

**Integrity** – You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them.

I think this is something we communally aspire to. As Unitarian Universalists, the core of our religion is not a statement of faith, a creed, or a story about God. Our core is a covenant, an agreement of how we will live together amidst all our theological diversity. Our core is integrity, it is living our values. And that is not something exclusive to us – I think we break our covenant when we put down other traditions, denouncing anyone who believes in God, or ascribes to a creed.

The difference, I think, is that our covenant is the foundation for our faith and our communities, and in other traditions, the foundation, the center, is a particular system of belief or story about the sacred. This could be the bible, Quran, Torah, Bhagavagita, etc. But in our house, we all bring different stories, different ideas about God, but what we share is a commitment to living inside a certain covenant. These are the seven principles, and they're on the back of your order of service.

At the board retreat two weeks ago, we talked about wanting to be known for something as a congregation. We discussed examples of things other congregations were known for. But what came up in the year of study you all did and in the board's conversation was that you all want to be known for putting our Unitarian Universalist principles into practice. In sum, you want to be who you say you are.

**Nonjudgment** – I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

This one, I think can be hard for us as Unitarian Universalists, because we do have a streak of individualism running through our culture and history. But even our forefather the transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau needed help. Yes, he lived alone in a tiny cabin in the woods, but his mom still came to do his laundry and would bring him warm donuts.

We generally have an easier time helping others, I think – it's not as vulnerable, we get to feel useful. But I have found that it's a powerful thing to witness someone else asking for help, especially one of our peers, because it is implicitly permission giving. When we ask for help, when we say what we need or feel, without judging ourselves, we give each other permission to do the same. And that is a powerful gift.

And finally:

**Generosity** – You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others.

Self-righteousness feels good in the moment, but it rarely if ever does us any good. Can you imagine instead a community in which we give and can expect generosity in the ways we interpret each other's words and actions? I find that imagining this, and trying to embody it, is immensely calming.

It cuts against the fear-based chatter of our minds, the leaning too far outside ourselves and imagining all manner of bad intentions in an effort

to protect ourselves from feeling too vulnerable, to try to foresee any hurt so we can guard against it.

Generosity is, I think an act of faith. Generosity assumes that there is a tender humanness, a longing for love and connection, inside everyone we meet. Generosity is not naivete, nor is it a lack of boundaries, it's a kind of humility, an assumption that we simply don't always know other people's intentions and it's very likely that their actions aren't about us anyways.

This is the anatomy of trust: boundaries, reliability, accountability, vault, integrity, non-judgement, and generosity. Trust is the core of all relationships – the presence or absence of it in varying degrees – and our core as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, is our commitment to our covenant, our seven principles. It is in our trust and our covenant that we come to belong to each other, here, in this place, in this vibrant and loving community.

This is why I'm a minister - because I believe that the being together in religious community matters, that it does something for our spirits that is both critical and sometimes hard to find in life. Here we are Unitarian Universalists, but I always tell people that I don't care what type of church or synagogue or temple you go to, as long as it loves you and teaches you to love the world. I believe we need the container of congregational relationships in order to walk safely into the unknown. Sometimes anonymity and solitude are helpful, maybe even easier, but they can also create isolation. And we are creatures wired for connection. We need to belong to each other.



And we are imperfect people. We can take that as given, thank goodness. Even with the highest aspirations and best of intentions we will mess up, we will let each other down sometimes, we'll be disappointed or angry with each other. And that's okay. We're all doing our best to practice being human, to show up with our whole wild hearts, to stay present when it's hard - and the beautiful thing is that in this place we do all of it together. Church is where we practice being human so we can go back out into the week a little softer, a little braver, a little clearer on how to follow our own moral compass.

So many of you have asked how you can be helpful in my transition - and you have been in so many ways - and so this is my charge to all of you: call your people back home, bring the friends and neighbors and family who need a home. Last time Kayla sang one of my favorite songs beautifully, in which the refrain is: This is our place this is our home. And to borrow a line from the song she'll sing now: here, You will be found.

In this house, we belong to each other.

Amen