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"Whenever Two or More of You Are Gathered In My name"

In the Christian scriptures Jesus says, "Whenever two or more of you are gathered in my name, I will be with you also." (Matthew 18:20) The Christian Church was founded on the premise that the Holy Spirit, lives and breathes and has its meaning in community. The Church wasn't a building or an institution it was a community of people who considered themselves one body, gathered in Jesus' name to breathe life into his message of love long after he was gone.

There is little doubt in my mind that, in spite of the differences between bands of early Christians, and there were many, they knew who they were and why they were gathered. For us, the answers to questions of identity and purpose are not quite as clear.

In her poem "Sunrise" Mary Oliver asks,

"What is my name? What is the name of the deep breath I would take over and over for all of us?"

We are a gathered community but what is the name of the deep breath we draw together? It's something deeper than religion or belief for each of us is called to choose a different path. We gather under the banner of the individual's right to choose. But are we simply a band of individualists or is there a name for the breath of life we share - the deep breath that transcends the particularities of individual belief - a deep breath that unites us?

"The key to healthy churches," writes the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, "is the ability to ride as intrepidly as possible the dynamic paradox of unity amidst diversity. No congregation does this flawlessly. Nonetheless, in a flourishing Unitarian Universalist parish all living traditions and theologies are duly honored; and different classes, colors, capacities, and life choices

are welcomed. The goal is to be diverse without becoming divided, to grow unified without succumbing to uniformity." (Creating Beloved Community)

But what is it, exactly, that unites us?

Diane Olson writes, "What is our oneness? We need to celebrate the whole as well as the parts. How can we become One... in commitment to collaborative, connecting community?" It's a good question, one that we need to answer together if we hope to move ahead with a strong sense of identity and purpose. (ibid)

I've been walking this path with you for almost two years now. I've had a chance to review the congregational surveys that many of you took the time to fill out and send in. (Thank you very much.) I've spent time with the Board and the Committee on Ministry evaluating the ministry of the church and maybe I've been spending too much time with my bike the last couple of weeks, but the image I keep coming back to is a wheel.

Wheels are amazing. This one's very light. It's made up of parts that are pretty weak, in and of themselves, but put them together and they become a strong, cohesive unit. This wheel can carry a lot of weight. Attached to the rest of my bike, it can take me anywhere I want to go.

So what does our wheel look like? We've got a rim that holds us together from the outside. We've got lots of spokes; all our groups, programs and committees. And we have a hub - that all important piece at the center that holds us together from the inside.

Our rim is our given identity - the identity we inherit from those who have gone before. Tom Owen Towle writes, "Unitarian and Universalist pioneers like Hosea Ballou, Judith Murray Sargent, Whitney Young, and Mary Livermore are our spiritual ancestors, along with our predecessors in our particular congregations. They came with the property... When we speak or fail to speak the truth in love, these spiritual ancestors stand in the wings, reassuring or chastising us on cue." (ibid) We aren't just making things up here as we go along. Who we are is based on who we have been.

The spokes of our wheel are all our programs and groups that connect the rim to the hub; the outside to the inside. The more spokes you have the stronger the wheel -- and we have plenty of spokes. These groups tend to reflect who we are as individuals with different interests and beliefs.

Our hub is our sense of unity, our oneness - that deep breath we all draw together that Mary Oliver talks about. It's the connective tissue, the spirit that binds us together whenever two or more of us are gathered. It's a palpable feeling when we're together but what do we call it? Without a name, without making it part of our explicit identity it's hard to lift it up and celebrate it. It's the "brighter light than the glimmer of one candle" that Anne Lamott talks about, the reason she makes Sam go to church. It's the sense that we're all pulling together to create something greater than ourselves. Each of us a single letter in the alphabet that together can be part of a great meaning.

We may not know exactly what to call it but it lives and moves and has its being when we gather in its name. To develop a strong hub; a sense of oneness, it's important for us to be together, to build bridges across boundaries of difference. To celebrate unity amidst diversity we have to know one another. It's been my observation that we have a lot of really fine spokes in this church. But the spokes of our wheel need to be connected to both the rim and the hub if it's going to be strong enough to take us where we want to go. The more we work on our connections the stronger our wheel will be.

Maybe connection or interconnection is the name of the deep breath that unites us. Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman believed that the ultimate commitment we can make is to be open enough to be moved and changed by each other. He called this kind of exchange "Creative Interchange". Creative Interchange requires us to take down the walls that divide us; speaking and listening from the center of who we are. When we truly open ourselves to one another we are able to transcend the boundaries of difference. In that moment we know that in the words of Francis David, "We need not think alike to love alike". And the fact that we love alike is the key to understanding the nature of our very existence. The very nature of our existence is interconnection. Our seventh principle says that we affirm and promote the interconnected web of life *of which we are a part*.

Interconnection is the name of that deep breath Mary Oliver was talking about - "the deep breath I would take over and over for all of us."

Artist Paul Levy writes: "To be gathered in his name is to see beyond the illusion of the separate self and realize that deep down, we are not separate but are actually interdependent and connected." But to experience interconnection we have to connect. We have to connect across the differences of opinion, belief and politics. To win you have to play. We have to be willing to show up and open ourselves up to one another.

That's one of the reasons why worship is so important. Worship is a corporate activity, meaning it helps us form a sense of ourselves as a unified body. Worship is the heartbeat of the church. It's the only thing we do together. We're like an active family - each of us going top speed in all sorts of different directions. But once a week we all sit down together and talk about things that are important to us. What we talk about may not always be important to you personally, but it may be important to someone else - someone you are bound to as parts of the a larger whole. Our commitments to the church are commitments to each other.

It's especially important that we have a full sanctuary on Sunday mornings if we expect to attract new members. It's not just about looking good, it's about being there to genuinely welcome people who may be looking for what you've found here. We all need to be here to let newcomers know that they are truly welcome here - that this is a place where they can be themselves. This is a place where they can explore their own beliefs and voice their opinions. This is a place where they will be encouraged and challenged to grow into themselves."

We should tell newcomer right off the bat that we're bound to disagree and that's OK but our connectedness transcends our differences. We're here to build bridges of understanding between differences; both within our congregation and out in the world. Showing up to welcome people, to tell them who we are and what we're all about is part of being a welcoming congregation in its broadest sense.

Worship is not mine or yours, it's ours. If it's not meaningful for you, if its not a place that strengthens your sense of connection to the larger whole let

me know, let the worship committee know. If you're part of a group that is meaningful for you, talk with your group about planning and leading worship service so you can share what's meaningful for you with the larger community. Or find ways to open up your group on occasion.

There are lots of ways that your groups can build more bridges with people both inside the church and out. The children's choir sings for our elders at Huntington Common and Atria. We took our Earth Day celebration to Laudholm Farm this spring. And we bless the shawls lovingly crafted by the members of our shawl ministry as a congregation. These are all ways of strengthening the connection between our spokes and the hub of our wheel that actually make our hub, our collective sense of identity stronger.

We have a lot of spokes to use to build a strong wheel. What I'd like to see us focus on in the coming year is strengthening our hub - a unifying center where all our spokes connect. A strong hub will give us a stronger sense of who we are and what we are meant to do in the world. A strong hub will hold our wheel together and help us get where we want to go.

May it be so...

Amen.