

UUFP – 26 MAY 2013

SERMON, Rev. DANIEL COSTLEY

CONNECTIONS

Our modern world has led us, we are told, to increased connection. As a family we recently spent a few nights with my mother in the tiny village she lives in, in a wild and rural part of England. Despite the rain, it was beautiful – windswept hillsides, good food, wonderful company – both family and the close-knit village community.

But no ‘connection’ in the modern sense. It was too remote for that. I had no e-mail. No Facebook. No Twitter. No Text messages. No mobile links at all. Yes, such places do still exist.

And that really didn’t matter. True connection was taking place for the whole weekend. A restored connection to my mother and step-father. The glorious connection of grand-children to a grand-parent. The connection to the villagers around through shared food, conversation, a Sunday church service, smiles. And tea. Lots of tea.

And I’ve been connecting quite a bit over recent months. In early April, Unitarians from across Britain gathered in Nottingham, for our annual General Assembly. A good series of meetings, much discussion, lots of social connection. Old friends, new friends. And tea.

Then, later in April, the London District of Unitarian congregations, of which my home congregation is a member, gathered at the church in Croydon, where Art Lester is Minister. We gathered to review our activities across the year. To plan for the future. To socialise. Old friends, new friends. And tea.

Then, two weeks ago, I led the Anniversary Service at Horsham. An honour to be the guest preacher at their 292nd Anniversary, an occasion for celebration, where members of neighbouring congregations come too – a birthday party really. But, for me at least it was more than that. Horsham was my home congregation before I left for Ministry. Horsham is where I was

introduced to Unitarianism – by Jopie and Richard Boeke. So the connections that day were many and varied for all attending

And at that Service, and at a great shared afternoon tea, we talked together, and we laughed together, and we shared food and stories. And tea. Lots of tea.

It seems to me there is something in the human condition that requires connection in some form. Connection to people, connection to the earth, connection in some way to the world around us. We cannot live in a vacuum for long. It is the connections that allow us to live our lives as full human beings.

As Unitarians, as Universalists, as Unitarian Universalists, we are sometimes proud of our independence. We are independent in structural terms. This congregation is self-managing, this congregation has autonomy. However, one of the beautiful things about Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist congregations is the willingness to be part of a network. Locally, nationally or globally. The networks of independent congregations provide the opportunity of connection to others. To learn, to share, to talk.

Whilst these connections are of course helpful and nourishing. Does this simple connection really describe the depth of togetherness we might sometimes need or experience?

The poet, priest and Dean of St Paul's, John Donne, who died in 1631 wrote:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
Is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
Well as a manor of thy friends or of thine
Own were; any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
The bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

Whilst we need to forgive the 17th Century gender specific language, what Donne is of course saying is that we are all, in some way, connected to one another. There is perhaps an invisible thread weaving its way through each and every one of us, maybe through each and every thing, that connects us.

In simple terms, any thing we do to this world and those people around us, is something that we are doing to ourselves.

Whilst I am sure the 17th Century Donne would be a little surprised at the reference, I think his approach to the unity of humanity and the oneness of all people is remarkably contemporary and is at the heart of the Unitarian message today. We are a movement that has emerged from the tradition of the oneness of God, of the unity of Creation. And as a movement we have evolved, in many different ways, but also with that underlying necessity for wholeness remaining as a central thread. The wholeness of humanity, or the wholeness of God, the wholeness of Creation and all that is within it.

This is an old statement. The Gospel of Thomas, an apocraphal Gospel – one that never made it into the final version of the Bible – has a saying of Jesus that sounds something like ‘The Kingdom of God is within you and all around you’.

If we take the ‘Kingdom of God’ to be that to which we all aspire – a world of peace and harmony right here on earth, today, then perhaps Thomas’s recollected words are indicating that the possibility of that perfect world is both within us, and all around us. Through openness to connection, to each other and to the world around, we open ourselves to the possibility to a better world.

In my world of electronic connections, I have recently become a Twitter friend of Yoko Ono, the widow of John Lennon. Yoko has several hundreds of thousands of Twitter friends, so I’m not sure we’ll count this as a close relationship. However, what the internet connection can provide is access to another’s ideas; the things they hold dear. And just this week, as I was writing this, I noticed a phrase on Yoko’s website:

A dream you dream alone is only a dream.
A dream you dream together is reality.

A reminder again of the positive power and possibility of connection. Physical, spiritual and by the power of the internet.

And I think the point that Yoko is trying to make here is that connection between people – in intention and in aspiration – can provide the true base on which the future might be created. And if that connection is forged in love and well-being, then that future will be one that seeks to bring peace and harmony to the world.

It is those that seek to create the connections that are the true heroes here.

Has anyone here ever played Connect 4? A sort of big plastic variant of noughts and crosses? As many will know, the purpose of the game is to drop coloured counters into a grid, taking one turn at a time, with the aim of getting four of your coloured counters into a row. Connect 4.

As with noughts and crosses, there is always a choice to be made when playing. Are you trying to disrupt your opponent, and ensure they fail? Or are you focussing instead on making your own connections? Trying to achieve the connections rather than spending time trying to prevent them? The winner in Connect 4 will almost always be the one that is trying to connect their pieces together. You will only win by chance if all your effort is geared towards destroying your opponent.

Of course, I do not suggest for one instant that life, and the need for connection, is anything like as simple as Connect 4. If only it were. But perhaps we might consider the way in which the positive approach to connection can bring about the success we seek. And if that success is defined as the achievement of human connection in love and compassion, then it is through our approach to connections that this will happen.

We might recognise our need for this connection, this linkage. But how do we make these connections? How do we find the loose ends to join?

In the words based on Martineau's writings we heard in our first reading, there was the simple suggestion that the connection is

always there, if we cannot feel it, it is because we cannot recognise it. But the connection is always there.

Martineau was speaking about the connection to the Universal Spirit, to that which many might call God but lives under many names. The idea that there is a Spiritual connection between us all – whether we notice or recognise it or not. But the connection exists.

Martineau saw the Spirit as that which is present everywhere, in and around everything and every person. The Spirit, for Martineau, and for many others, represents that binding presence that holds us to one another. The silver thread of life to which we are all connected and through which we are connected to everything around us.

And there is nothing but ourselves to prevent that necessary connection to each other and, through that loving connection, to the greater Spirit, that greater reality, that transcendent something, God perhaps, that binds us all.

The Spirit can of course help us each individually, or can be part of the nature of our outward love and friendship. Our kindness and our good deeds. But even then I find it the case that focus on our own lives, by ourselves, can also be enhanced immeasurably by the association of community. By connecting to a friend, a partner, a family, a social support group, a congregation perhaps, we can find a benefit to our own lives as well as hopefully contributing to the lives of others.

The phrase ‘hunting in packs’ is often used in a negative way. Yet like the wolves that can cover more ground in a hunting pack than they can as isolated individuals, do we not find that our ongoing search for truth and love in the world is better progressed by working with each other? Our search is better achieved through spiritual community. We hunt in packs.

And there are always other searchers out there. People like you and me, asking those searching questions. I would hope that we can be seen as a body of people that will welcome fellow travellers on the path; we know the value of connection, and to offer such connection to others must be a key element of our outward face to society at large. To connect is to enable a flow of information and support in both directions. We are seeking the possibility of

making connections. In making connections we strengthen ourselves as well as those we connect to.

Now, taking this full circle, the connection to our fellow human beings provides an essential connection to ourselves. In the reading from Louise Rogers this morning, we were reminded of how our hands, those things that can provide true and actual physical connection to another person, be it through touch, a hand-written letter, or even the tap, tap, tap of the computer keyboard, our hands can show us the connection to our own lives. Our history. Where we are coming from, what we have been doing. Who we really are?

From hands, to friends, to welcomed strangers. From individuals, to congregations, to networks of societies. From our inner-most thoughts, to our shared experiences. From our silent connection to the world to that glorious realisation and revelation that we are all part of the Oneness of life. We are all necessary cogs in this great machine. We are all part of the Spirit, and the Spirit is part of us.

May we each strive to encourage the connections that can bring hope and light to the world