



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**Lifting Up Our Lives – Three
Homilies**

Neighborhood Board Led Service
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NURTURE COMMUNITY WITH ONE ANOTHER, OUR NEIGHBORHOOD, AND THE
WORLD AT LARGE

Lauren Eaton Worley

Nurture community with one another, our neighborhood, and the world at large.

What a radical notion.

Growing up UU, the concept of nurturing each other and our community seems natural. Of course I will support your growth. Of course my priority will be helping to nurture the communities I am a part of. That is just natural to me.

And yet, it occurs to me it isn't that natural. I, and I expect many of you, live in a world where my Facebook feed is an echo chamber. "Look at what awful human rights violation the President talked about today." "Call your representative about this horrible legislation." "Check out the bad lip reading of the inauguration." I frequently find that the same post is shared 20 times by my friends, and I love it. I love knowing that I live in a world where I can share my values and not be attacked. Where I can wear a Black Lives Matter pin and people GET it. Where I can "like" a comment without worrying about how people will react.

But our echo chambers are a problem. I think mine especially. Most of my friends are Unitarian or Unitarian leaning. The majority of my Facebook feed are friends I have met at Unitarian events. The community I have nurtured for so long is also the community that I feel might be preventing me from nurturing the world at large.

This became wildly apparent on Saturday at the women's march. As I was walking (or rather slowly drifting...) through the crowd, wearing my bright yellow Standing on the Side of Love shirt, a woman walked by our group and repeated "thank you to your church for showing up" to each of us. I was so wrapped up in the multitude of feelings I had in that moment, that the meaning behind those words didn't hit me until later that day.

Thank you to your church for showing up.

As I have reflected on those words, it has once again become clear that my normality is not everyone's. This woman felt compelled to say thank you to something I thought was totally normal for us to do. We have always shown up haven't we? No. We haven't.

That concept is something I've struggled with this past week. I want to challenge this church. I want to shout from this pulpit, why did we wait nine years between attending major rallies? Why did we sit complacent and not participate en-masse at the Black Lives Matter rallies? Why

did we only wake up when the rest of our country did too? Isn't our job to be on the forefront of change and social justice? Isn't that what our principles call us to do?

Then a voice inside my head shouts the same things to me. Why didn't you? Why didn't you rally the church to go to more events? Why did you show up briefly at some events, but not follow through? Where were you? Isn't this your community too?

My echo chamber has made me deaf to other worlds. I have spent the past eight years, liking my friend's posts and comments and feeling like if the world is what Facebook tells me it is, we are going to be okay. But November told me that I was wrong. The world is not what my echo chamber says. My community is greater than these four walls or my general Unitarian world. When I talk about those other worlds, I think about how we have become such a fan of "othering" people. The idea that we think it is okay to say "you must be a terrible person because you voted for that guy." And yes, that vote ultimately lead to the legitimizing of oppression and removal of rights. But echoing the concept of "the other" is what got us to this day, this place, this feeling like the world is collapsing and we just need to find a way to hold on.

Aziz Ansari hosted Saturday Night Live last week, and in his monologue he talks about this idea of the other. He reminds us that demonizing people who voted differently than us might be a little bit of a problem. He reminds us that some people voted for one part of the president's message and were able to look past everything else. I struggle with that idea, because how can one look past the oppression of people I love?

On Sunday in the youth group, I made a statement about how I have promised myself that I would correct only "one stupid statement on Facebook per day." I said it with a lot of venom, thinking of the statement I had respectfully challenged earlier that day. As group continued, one of the youth made an unrelated comment about not calling the other side stupid and boy did that hit home.

Couple that with Ansari's monologue and the idea of nurturing community takes on a whole new meaning. I am slowly starting to understand that my community is not only the 3 million people who voted like me, but everyone else as well. My echo chamber can't be my only understanding of the world. I need to listen, I need to HEAR the sides I don't agree with. I'm angry at that side, I really am, but I truly believe that we got here because we all stopped listening to each other. We all drifted into our echo chambers and forgot that the people we were calling stupid or arguing with are actually people. Real human beings that aren't all horrible, awful, trolls. And if we make a commitment as a church to nurture community with one another, our neighborhood, and the world at large that means everyone.

So what do we do? Ansari ended his monologue with this statement, "If you're scared about Trump and you're very worried, you're going to be OK, too. Because if you look at our country's history, change doesn't come from presidents. Change comes from large groups of angry people. And if Day 1 is any indication, you are part of the largest group of angry people I

have ever seen." Let's channel that anger! Let's leave our echo chambers and take action. Our church is a hub, but we need to get out. We need to not be complacent. With the current political climate, I'm not worried about us going nine years between major actions, but I am worried that our echo chambers will make it hard to hear each other. Nobody will change their mind if we keep arguing with each other, our echo chambers will get louder and we won't be able to stop the oppression. So to that I say, go out, listen, talk, challenge, understand, converse, nurture. And then take to the streets and change the world.

ENSURE THE CONTINUITY OF OUR CHURCH THROUGH
GENEROSITY AND GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Nancy L.C. Steele

Wednesday morning when I walked up the rise back to our house I felt a chill wind on my already cold face, pushing against me. It was a slight breeze, not strong enough even to move twigs, but it was unpleasant.

At night, I expect the sundowner breeze as the cool air flows down the mountain into the sun-warmed valleys. But in the morning I expect the wind to be at my back, pushing me up the mountain. This early morning, the down-mountain wind caught me by surprise.

It's an upside down time right now. Not just in the larger world, but even personally in my own life. This time reminds me of memories of childhood, perplexed by much of what was happening to me and why, experiences washed over me, none the less.

A lot of life is like that. We just live, day to day, unaware of the deep currents beneath pushing us in directions we don't expect. Or the winds that blow the wrong way. Later we struggle to understand why we are, who we are, what happened to that bright-eyed child, that confident woman?

Why, for example, do I care so much about giving away my money? It's a puzzle. I should want to hold on to money tight especially now when my income has been reduced. It's a mystery.

Once you spend money, it is gone. Money in the bank or under the mattress is good. (Before my mother died she confided in me from her hospital bed that I would find money under her pillows. Ok Mom, I said, and went to look. I was surprised to find she had been sleeping on over \$10,000 cash. That must have felt good to her!) Money in hand represents security, for paying the bills, for retirement, for keeping together body and soul.

Now where did that come from? Body, yes, but soul? What does money have to do with soul? I don't believe in the afterlife or a soul that outlives us. Yet in the last couple of years, I seem to

have become a believer in soul, if I count the number of times I've referred to "keeping body and soul together."

I was searching around the internet and found this quote by Maya Angelou. She said "I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver." That sounds good. I want my soul to be liberated. Even if I don't know what soul is.

But when I say, "keeping body and soul together," I am thinking of nourishment, not liberation.

Not only of my physical self but my spiritual self. And that brings me to community, for it is in community that those two concepts merge.

Spirit, love, service, and community.

And I want my community to be here to nourish me and my family. One has to take care of a community, be a part of its formation and continuation: That's called Stewardship.

My community is broad and includes: Museums and public radio stations I have joined, gardens I walk in and parks I camp in, our own camp in the mountains, the local land trust, and this church community. Because this church community, which matches my values, helps me to keep body and soul together. And I like the people who are part of this community.

Here's another quote I found recently, from some students of psychology:

"....we find a positive association between levels of life satisfaction and individuals' acts of giving to charitable organizations. However when we disaggregate donations into religious versus secular donations, we find that only giving to religious charitable organizations [is] significantly associated with higher levels of life satisfaction."¹

So there you go. Give money to your church and feel better, live better. How wonderful that an action so simple as transferring some of what you have accumulated to someone else, to an institution that you believe in, improves your life, inside and out.

In this topsy-turvy world when up is down and red is white, where our commander in chief may believe "six impossible things before breakfast," what I can hold onto are my values and beliefs:

That giving is good for my soul, whatever that is.
That this church, this community, nourishes me, spiritually,
And I can co-create community, with you, through giving.
Keeping body and soul together.

¹ https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/files/event_resources/lifesatisfactiondonations14112.pdf

RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY AND MUSIC IN OUR CHURCH, OUR LIVES
AND THE WORLD AROUND US

Esther Martin

I look forward to coming to church every Sunday to sing in the choir and to hear the music. Even before I became a church member, I joined the choir. Music has always been an important part of my life. There was always music in my family. My grandfather was a musician and music teacher in Mexico before he, my grandmother and my mother immigrated to the United States when my mother was four years old. My mother and father sang in their church choir.

My first major introduction to performance singing was in the fourth grade when I sang a solo in a school assembly. It was "I Dream of Genie with the Light Brown Hair." I sang in the youth choir in my church and one summer we joined with other youth choirs in the Los Angeles area to form one big choir for a music festival. There was one song in particular that had the most beautiful close harmony that literally sent chills up my spine. You may have a particular song that does the same to you. My current song is Biebl's "Ave Maria." Eric Whittacre, a contemporary choral music composer describes a similar time in his life when he first started choral singing. He says, "I heard this counterpoint around me like a cosmic Swiss watch – all the parts fit together, all 110 people moving and breathing together. I think that what happened was that for the first time I felt truly part of something larger than myself."

I love choral singing. I love singing in a group and hearing the voices around me and the feeling of being part of the whole. Group singing is good for you – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. I would venture to guess that you felt better when you left after last Sunday's group singing service led by Kim Harris. I know I did.

For most of human history in all cultures, in all parts of the world, people have been singing. Singing is in our genes, in human nature. We are hard-wired to sing. We have an urge to sing and to hear others sing.

I know that singing and listening to the music in church means a lot to you. In the process of the Vision Casting workshops in the spring of last year, you voiced your hopes, wishes, and dreams for our church. Music was one of the things high on your list.

In his book, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, David Levitin, professor of psychology and behavioral science at McGill University, says, "When we sing, it brings us outside ourselves. It forces us to think about what another person is doing. We've got to pay attention to what someone else is doing, coordinate our actions with theirs and it really does pull us out of ourselves." He goes on to say, "All of that activates a part of the frontal cortex that's responsible for how you see yourself in the world, and whether you see yourself as part of a group or alone. The second thing, of course, is there's a whole neurochemistry to singing. We now have evidence that when people sing together, it releases oxytocin – the friendship chemical – or the trusting or the empathy chemical. It's associated with social bonding."

Studies have shown that there are many benefits to group singing. Here are just a few: it promotes equality, it's a wonderful stress manager, it's a form of meditation, and it creates positive energy. But the most important benefit, in my estimation, is that it brings us together and keeps us together in a very special way.

In her book *Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing with Others*, Stacy Horn writes about the moving, transcendent community experiences she has had over the 30 years that she has sung in the Choral Society of Grace Church in New York. She says:

It doesn't even matter if you can sing well. I can't. The best I can manage is singing in tune. Most of the time. Hopefully. Luckily, in a 2005 study, investigators found that group singers experienced the same benefits even when "the sound produced by the vocal instrument is of mediocre quality."

She goes on to say,

It's arguable whether my vocal instrument even reaches that level, but I'm happy to reap the benefits nonetheless. I'm convinced the answer will be found in the study of harmony. Because the world doesn't open up into a million shimmering dimensions of hope and possibility when I sing alone, or even with other people in unison. It happens when I'm surrounded by my fellow choristers, and all the different sounds we're making combine to leave us thrumming in harmony – lit up like fireflies flashing in synchrony by whatever masterpiece is currently racing through our brains, bodies, and hearts.

And how do you feel after you have had your musical experience on Sundays here at church? Hopefully, uplifted and euphoric. I believe that music is transformative – that I am transformed and that I am a different and better person when I leave this place of worship.

And I would wish that for you as well.