



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“The Joy of Belonging”
Sermon Series Part 3 of 5
Delivered 11 December 2022
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“It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again and they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.”

What does it mean to feel like you are a part of the “we”? What does it mean to feel as though you belong?

This powerful [Marge Piercy poem](#) (thank you, Craig!) holds an example from my own life. As you may have noticed, I am fond of using poems as texts during our worship services. They are places where ideas are articulated beautifully, briefly, and often in new ways that present us with new perspectives. In short, I pick them because poems are the closest thing I have to scripture. But this was not always the case! When I was in high school, I hated poetry. I hated when we had to learn it, I hated when we had to write it, I had a terrible attitude about it and I did not keep my opinions to myself.

Somewhere along the way that changed, and one big reason is my friend Laura. She is a poet herself, and a lover of poetry, and also just happens to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. She also has an incredible knowledge of and memory for poetry, so when I wanted this particular poem but could NOT remember for the life of me what it was called - Laura was the first person I

asked. "Help!" I said, "There's a poem, and it might be by Marge Piercy, and it's about how communities form?" Mere moments later, I got the message in return - "Is it 'The Low Road'?" And sure enough, it was! Magical!

It's magical when you fit with a person, or a group of people. When you share ideas, passions, interests, values, you can feel a sense of at-home-ness within the group, even as it moves from small networks of support into communities, and even social movements.

And of course, that feeling of "finding a home" is often named as a reason people stay in Unitarian Universalist congregations after they find them. Throughout this year, I will be preaching a series of sermons on the [Article II Study Commission](#) and the ongoing work of Unitarian Universalism - and this is the third sermon in that series, on Belonging.

Today's reading has a lot to say about belonging. For instance:

"Two people can keep each other sane, can give support, conviction, love, massage, hope, sex.

Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge. With four you can play bridge and start an organization. With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.

A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country."

Piercy's poem was published in 1977, so while it still rings with a deep truth, some things have obviously changed - it clearly no longer takes a hundred thousand people to have their own media any more, for instance. But it is that growth, that accretion of belonging that still rings so true. And there is the sense of safety and expansiveness - if I am in a fight, I'm in trouble. If I have someone with me, the trouble lessens. The more people, the better it seems.

This is not to say belonging is uncomplicated.

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At what point does "one more" become unwieldy? At one point does "one more" mean it's harder to make decisions, to come to consensus, to do the hard work of discussion, deliberation, and compromise that is the hallmark of functional large groups?

British anthropologist Robin Dunbar developed a theory based on the size of primate communities in relation to the size of the primate brain. By his calculations, the upper limits for humans should be about 150 - this is now called "the Dunbar number," and while ongoing research has shown there are many more nuances to the creation of functional social groups, it can be a useful tool to consider how we will manage, how we will survive, how we will thrive in ever-larger groups.

If we love our group - whatever it is, our friend group, our bridge club, our gardening collective, our movie discussion group on social media - we want to share it with people, right? Sure...mostly. Have you ever felt protective of a group, though?

Here's my example: I'm part of a book club that has been in existence since January of 2001. Of course, over time some members have dropped away, while others have joined. My friend who founded the book club and myself are the only original members left. And right now, the size and membership feels...just right. Two months ago, a friend brought a friend of his from work, and I will admit - though I am not proud of this! - I will admit one of my first thoughts was, "Oh no, someone who doesn't already know all our in-jokes and habits." But do you know what? She's great, and pretty quickly I became super glad we had added one more to our "we."

But that tension is there and it is real.

When we speak in terms of faith communities, I have heard membership growth discussions that cited the "terrible 200s." Growing from a small congregation to a larger one often gets stymied when the numbers hit the 200s. Is this because of the Dunbar number? Is it because it is hard to maintain consensus as numbers grow? Is it because too much growth can start to feel unwelcome by people who love the community "just as it is"? All of those are true. There's no judgment in that statement - this is a repeatable phenomenon over and over, in UU congregations and elsewhere.

So when you move beyond the congregational level, where it can grow more challenging to make decisions even as your own community grows, what must it be like to propose, consider, and enact sweeping change on a national scale?

It would look something like the work that the Article II Study Commission has undertaken in the past two years. It means lots and lots of small conversations, because when you add up enough small groups, you can get a sense of the larger whole. Article II of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association is the subject - the place where our principles and sources are defined. So the ongoing work has not only needed to try to gain input from a large number of interested people, but also with the end goal of revising a very beloved part of our faith.

What kind of faith revises its own foundations?! Well, the truth of the matter is that the seven principles and six sources currently contained within Article II have only been there in that form since the 1980s. Every time in the history of the Unitarian Universalist Association that we have considered this part of our bylaws, there has been pushback. There were people speaking against adding the 7th principle. There were people speaking out against adding the six sources at all, and then against adding Earth based traditions.

Change is unsettling. We may understand that change can lead to improvement, but in the moment when the future is uncertain, it can be hard to remember. Because change can also lead to degradation, to dispute, and to a diminution of the “we.”

What a radical notion, then, to challenge ourselves to engage actively with this change. Because change will come, no matter what. To know this, and deliberately take up the work of change, to try to include as many of our “we” as possible in that work - that’s audacious, and to my mind it is cause for hope.

Because the flipside of “we” - of every “we” we create - is “they.”

At the start of today’s poem, we see the “they” -

“What can they do
to you? Whatever they want.

[...]

They can do anything
you can't stop them
from doing.”

Of course Piercy’s “they” isn’t strictly defined, nor is her “we.” Because what matters is that line. When we talk about belonging, we must also consider those who do not belong. Not with a mind to try to please all people at all

times - that would not be possible. But when we create a “we” it is imperative that we also consider what “they” is being created.

Who is being invited, included? Who is being shut out, shunned? As we continue to hear about the work of the Article II commission, and as we look forward to the updated draft of their proposed revisions - which should be available in January - it might do well for us to consider what growth and change can mean. For the “we” that is UUCYork, and for the “we” that is Unitarian Universalism more broadly. We are a small faith tradition in the grand scheme of things, and it is my belief that the growth and expansion of Unitarian Universalism can be a liberating and life-saving force in our society. And growth and expansion will always be messy, will always be challenging, will always spark some people’s passions while igniting others’ fears.

But if you can remember your own sense of belonging, the sense of “at-home-ness” that you first felt in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, it is my guess you will want that for other people. That sense of discovery, that sense of coming home, is priceless. I would like any “we” that I’m a part of to wish and work for more people to have that experience. As we sang earlier, “Draw the circle wide / draw it wider still / let this be our song / no one is alone.”

Please look to your communications from UUCYork for updates on the Article II Study Commission's ongoing work, as we prepare for the annual General Assembly in Pittsburgh in June of 2023. The work of drawing this circle, of expanding our “we,” is work that we are all called to do.

“[...]it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean,
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May it be so.