



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“On Trust and Naming: The Labels We Use to Identify Ourselves and Others”

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This weekend, I was delighted to welcome a longtime friend of mine into town. We have been friends for 35 years, but due to geographic distance, my time in seminary, and the pandemic, we hadn't seen each other in person since 2017. Another friend of hers lives in Carlisle, and we met up for lunch yesterday. Now I have not seen her friend since 2000, when we were both bridesmaids in our mutual friend's wedding. And what I discovered was, I was talking with both of these women with the deep trust of long association.

Trust, it turns out, is transitive. The transitive property, you might remember, is the statement that if $a = b$, and $b = c$, then $a = c$. I trust my friend of 30+ years completely. She trusts her friend of 30+ years completely. The trust that my friend puts in her friend basically means that I have already been given reason to trust my friend's friend even with minimal contact.

Whew, I just said the word friend so many times, it started to lose its meaning! And I never want that to happen.

Trust is such a key part of any relationship, especially any long-lasting one. We can trust people, we can trust groups, organizations, institutions. Once trust is built up, it can carry us across many years. When trust is broken, however, it can feel difficult to rebuild.

Today's sermon is courtesy Karen Wishart, our amazingly hard-working auction organizer who happened to win the raffle that was part of the auction, allowing her to request a sermon topic of her own choosing. Karen first wanted to talk about labels - about that way of naming and categorizing things

and people in the world around us. Then, upon doing some more consideration and having new information, she came back to me with trust - how it is eroding in our world and what on earth we can do to get it back.

Karen presented both of these topics to me by mentioning how divided our society has become. It's this connecting theme that feels like the heart of the matter. How do we make decisions about one another? How often and how easily can we change them? If someone breaks our trust, it can take a long time to rebuild - and so the same must be for groups and institutions.

So, let's think about trust - first, let's think about the Lion and the Mouse from [our story](#). The Lion laughs at the Mouse for thinking they'll ever be able to offer something in kind when the Mouse pleads for their life. Now on the surface, this makes sense, right? Let's think about the various ways these two creatures could devise labels for one another. The Lion could look at the Mouse and think: "small animal," "insignificant animal," "shy," "cowardly," "quiet." And the Mouse could likewise look at the Lion and think: "large animal," "scary animal," "noisy," "fierce," "dominant." If the Lion never moved past the initial assumptions - for instance, that of insignificance - why they might never have listened to the Mouse. And if the Mouse got too caught up on the "scary animal" label, then the Mouse might never have worked up the courage to ask for mercy.

Labels, of course, are a method for organizing information. And they can be useful! We are constantly taking in a stream of information about everything around us, and it can be entirely overwhelming. We need to sort the information coming in through our various senses if we are to figure out what needs our attention with what priority. If I happen to notice that I need to tie my shoe, but I look up and see that someone has tripped and fallen and may need my help, I'm going to go check on that person first. On the way, maybe I'll trip on my shoelace and someone will need to prioritize checking on me. These cycles of intake, prioritization, and action help us to be fully present in the world, not too overwhelmed by all the information and choices - they let us make informed decisions.

But if we take labels beyond our initial assessments - if we keep a label or categorization of a person or situation first in our minds without considering new information as we receive it - then we are stagnant and stuck. If we are the Lion, we gain a tiny snack, and later lose our life. If we are the Mouse who can't get past the initial fear, then actually - two lives may be lost. Two lives would be lost in this story if the Mouse couldn't take other information into consideration other than "This Lion is scary!"

Let's go back to that transitive property. I trust my friend's friend because I trust my friend completely and she trusts her friend completely. Now, people are not mathematical equations - just like they are more than just a label or category! - so of course it's a little complicated. In [our reading today](#) from adrienne maree brown, we hear:

"trust the people and they become trustworthy."

And later we hear:

"trust the people and you will become trustworthy."

Social science and neuroscience have turned their attention to trust - how it is built, how it is destroyed, how it is rebuilt. Karen brought to my attention a three-part series from the NPR program On Point called "[essential trust](#)." It examines trust in the animal kingdom, then in individual humans, and then in societies and governmental institutions.

In part two of the series, about individual relationships, we hear from Jamil Zaki, associate professor of psychology at Stanford University and Director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab. Zaki says:

"Well, I think that we,[...] don't trust each other enough. If you ask people to estimate how much a person will reciprocate in a trust game, they underestimated by about 30%. So we believe that people are less trustworthy

than they really are. And I think that to your point, we especially loathe to trust people who are different from ourselves in any number of ways, whether people who look differently than us, people who identify differently, people who believe different things than we do.

And I think that those ancient instincts that [...] might have served us in ancient times, but they're not always serving us now. And that lack of trust across difference can be an enormous barrier to collaboration between people, to friendships, and I would argue to democracy. Because once we start to imagine that people we disagree with are just wholesale untrustworthy, that they're bad people, well, then we foreclose on any possibility of finding common ground."

Social neuroscience shows that people are more trustworthy than we assume. Our reading tells us this: "trust the people and they become trustworthy." Or even, "trust the people and they will demonstrate their inherent trustworthiness." But something does change in us when we are trusted, too. Again, neuroscience has demonstrated that people experience a rise in oxytocin in their brains when they feel trusted. If you demonstrate that you trust me, I feel better! Oxytocin is one of the "feel good" hormones that our bodies and brains use to promote positive feelings and relationships.

Now science tells us this in studies and charts. And stories and poetry tell us this in emotions and instincts. Trust the people and they become trustworthy. Trust the people and YOU become trustworthy. When I trust you, you feel better. You might even become more inclined to trust me.

Let's think about the Dalai Lama and our chalice lighting quotes, specifically: "You can't buy trust in the supermarket." He is reminding us in both quotes that trust builds on concern for others. The Lion, though he laughs at the Mouse, does have a basic sense of concern. Even if the Lion doubts the Mouse can ever repay the kindness, the Lion feels better. And the Mouse certainly does! And the Mouse begs for mercy out of a sense of self-preservation, but is

under no obligation other than a sense of integrity when it comes time to help the Lion. But the Mouse has the sense of trust, and the good feelings it builds, and so does not hesitate to help the Lion.

All of this is great. Trust grows when we give it AND when we receive it. We can even foster a growing sense of trust over time. But so far we've mainly talked about individuals. What about societies? What about the divisions that we see growing daily? How on earth do we think about trust on a scale that large?

We already heard from our social neuroscientists that lack of trust is dangerous to a democracy, because a democracy is made of people, and if some participants in a democracy distrust other participants on a "just because" of a certain label or classification, then social cohesion erodes. And in the final part of the series on "Essential Trust," economists and social scientists who have studied the record low trust that citizens of Brazil have in their own government elaborate on this dissolution that can occur. When a government is transparent and has integrity - when it is trustworthy, when it says what it is going to do and does it - then trust can be regained. But since a government is made up of many people, it is that much harder to maintain integrity. What if I got elected on one promise, and you got elected by promising the opposite? Why then, people have different expectations and will lose trust when they are not met.

Let's think about our reading one last time. Adrienne maree brown wrote the piece on trusting the people as a part of her work on community organizing, which is called Emergent Strategy. Any community is made of people, and people are fallible. Trust must be able to reside where perfection does not and cannot. So when we fail, what do we do? Brown writes:

"trust that each breach of trust can deepen trust or clarify boundaries."

If we take the time to examine the complexity of a trust breach, we can learn more about ourselves and about others. Now it feels hard to talk about

complexity and deep learning in our current social environment. But let's remember that trust builds. And that each of us is capable of being trustworthy. And that each time we do it, we feel good, and others feel good. And if we can demonstrate integrity - if we can recognize when trust has been broken and make amends, can be accountable for our actions that may have broken trust, then trust can be rebuilt. It might be easier for two people than an entire society - but it starts with us. It starts small. Trust yourself. Trust others. Build the muscle of looking past your first impressions. Build the muscle of learning that your assumptions may be wrong. Be open to a more trustworthy world and hold yourself accountable to be a part of it.

When we learn to trust we all benefit.

“trust the people who see and hold your heart.

trust the people who listen to the whales.

trust the people and you will become trustworthy.

trust the people and show them your love.

trust the people.”

So may it be.