

“Who Are We? – Community and Identity”
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Well, it's that time of year again, when some of us begin to make resolutions and others of us have already begun to break them. I've tried to keep it simple this year. I've resolved to try to go for walks 2 or 3 times a week, health and weather permitting.

This wasn't always something I had to resolve to do. When Cathy and I lived in Littleton, I'd go for a walk with the dogs almost every day on the conservation land behind our house. I especially loved winter walks after the first of the year. Deer hunting season would be over. The woods would be mostly empty and awe-inspiringly beautiful.

It's a hard time of year to walk in Arlington. The dogs have to be on leashes all year long, for one thing. We live in The Heights, so it's hilly. It can be dangerously icy. And although there is a law about snow removal, not everyone cleans the sidewalks in front of his or her house. I've learned to never go for a walk in the winter without my Yak Trax.

Over the last few years I've begun to notice patterns when it comes to snow and ice removal. There are certain streets that I avoid – partly because they are too hilly - and there are certain houses in front of which the snow never seems to disappear. I try not to judge, although I've fallen more than once. I do, however, reserve the right to make hypotheses about the residents of those houses. I have a theory, you see, that one's snow removal tendencies can be seen as an indication of what I might call one's “neighborliness index.”

I've walked entire blocks on which the residents of each house had shoveled only enough of a path to get from his or her front door to his or her car, leaving the other half of their sidewalk entirely untouched. It seems as if perhaps they spend no time talking with their neighbors, at least during the wintry months. It seems as if perhaps they think little if at all of any of us who might walk along those streets, least of which, the mail carriers who travel those routes 6 days out of every week.

When we were considering moving out of our house in Littleton, one of the things we thought about was our neighbors. We had great neighbors in Littleton. We were concerned that we might not be so lucky in Arlington. But as fate would have it, we got lucky yet again.

One night earlier this week, I arrived home to find that my walkway and front porch had been salted and sanded. My neighbor Larry was the benefactor, as he often is. He'd even gone out to get us more salt when we ran out.

Last winter when I wasn't allowed to shovel, Cathy went out to buy a snow blower. And when our next-door neighbors found out what she'd done, they offered to pay for half of it. Now we

take turns clearing snow, not only for our two houses, but for 4 or 5 other neighbors as well. And Larry helps out by buying gas, or, as he did a couple weeks ago, by spending hours out in the cold with Cathy using a hairdryer to try to thaw the fuel line.

We have a high neighborliness index in our little enclave. It is a great example of what is known as a “gift economy.” We give to one another with no expectation of payment for service or *quid pro quo*. We simply help one another out in many different ways whenever and however we can.

We live – in our larger culture – within a commodity or exchange economy, not a gift economy. We pay for our food, and for work to be done on our car, and for our driveways to get plowed. We are consumers. We pay in exchange for a service and then we no longer owe the service provider a thing. We pay up our account, and we’re done with them...until the next time we need them. But it is the exchange that matters...not the relationship. In a gift economy, it is the relationships that take precedence.

Some other differences...In a commodity economy, what matters most is what we possess; status comes from ownership. In a gift economy, we take pride in the contributions that we are able to make to one another, not in what we own. Those with the highest status are those who give the most...like our neighbor, Larry. Participating in a gift economy encourages a real sense of community. Whereas, being a consumer in a commodity economy fosters and strengthens one’s sense of being an individual.

I know that those times in my life when I’ve had the privilege of living in a place with a strong sense of neighborliness and community, I have been the better for it. I have, in a real sense, been transformed by it...certainly in terms of how I think of myself...in terms of my identity. For in those settings, I have not been able to think of myself only as an individual. It hasn’t been “every person for his or herself,” or “looking out for number one.” Instead, I have been a member...a member of a community with a strong awareness that my actions – or inactions – will affect everyone who, say, walks down the sidewalk in front of my house after a snowstorm.

In his book *Deep Economy*, from which our reading was taken this morning, Bill McKibben writes about individualism and community...and identity. In the reading, he points out that whereas our ancestors were born with a “fixed identity” – they knew who they’d marry and what kind of work they’d do, for instance – we’ve been emancipated in many ways from the sort of well-ordered societies in which they lived. Now it is up to us to “make something of ourselves.” Our identities are much more fluid...and self-chosen. We can decide who we’ll be.

McKibben is, of course, talking about our culture at large, but what he says is also very true of the microcosm of our church – and of Unitarian Universalism, in general. In other religious traditions, religious identity is assigned. We are told what we need to believe to belong. Here we are free to believe what we must.

And so there is a tension that exists in our churches between the sort of hyper-individualism that is a part of our larger culture and exaggerated in our religious culture, and the sense of community that we try to foster as participants in church. There is a tension between our freedom to believe and act as we feel called and our responsibilities to one another.

We struggle always – consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – with the question, “Who are we?” or perhaps, “Whose are we?” Do we think of ourselves primarily as individuals or as members and participants in something larger than ourselves? And what are the implications of thinking of ourselves in one way or the other?

In his book, McKibben uses the example of Wal-Mart to illustrate his point about individuals and communities:

In the few years when Wal-Mart was expanding fastest in Iowa, the state lost 555 grocery stores, 298 hardware stores, 293 building supply stores, 161 variety shops, 158 women’s clothing stores, and 116 pharmacies. The jobs offered by the new Supercenters don’t make up the difference: academics estimate a new Wal-Mart eliminates a job and a half for every job it creates. And not only are those new jobs ill paid, providing minimal benefits, and often abusive...they also drive down everyone else’s wages and benefits... Meanwhile, taxpayers are covering the health care costs of uninsured Wal-Mart workers and buying school lunches for their children. All in all...counties with Wal-Marts have grown poorer than surrounding counties, and the more Wal-Marts they had, the faster they grew poor. None of this even touches questions about what Wal-Mart has done to transfer American jobs abroad, or to sponsor sweatshops around the world. Suffice it to say [writes McKibben]: *communities* suffer.

On the other hand [he goes on to say], *individuals* benefit, at least as consumers. Wal-Mart sells stuff cheap.¹

Furthermore...

Wal-Mart can offer those low prices precisely because of the damage it does to communities...²

And here’s where the matter of identity – of how we think of ourselves – comes in...

Because economists think of human beings primarily as individuals and not as members of a community, they see this superefficiency as an uncomplicated blessing.³

And here’s the kicker, as McKibben writes:

For Wal-Mart to prosper, *we must think of ourselves as individuals* – must think that being individuals is the better deal.⁴

If we were to think of ourselves as members of a community – a community that included small-business owners, and the underpaid workers here and abroad, and the families without health-

¹ McKibben, Bill, *Deep Economy*, Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2007, 106-107.

² Ibid., 107.

³ Ibid., 107.

⁴ Ibid., 108, (emphasis added).

insurance...if we were to think of ourselves as having responsibilities toward them – we very well might not shop at Wal-Mart.

In short, how we identify – how we think of ourselves – whether primarily as individuals with our own wants that must be met, and with the freedom to see that they are met; or primarily as members of communities with wants, which may sometimes need to take the back seat to the needs of the community as a whole, and with responsibilities to that community – how we think of ourselves has very real implications for how we live our lives and for the choices that we make each and every day.

So, how do you think of yourself? Who are you? Whose are you? To whom do you belong? Where do your loyalties lie? When it comes to this church, do you think of yourself more as a participant or as a consumer?

When it comes to making contributions of your time or talent, do you take pride in how much or how well you can contribute? Or do you think in terms of what you hope you'll get in exchange: religious education for your children; inspiring worship services; thought-provoking sermons? And what happens if you don't? What happens if and when you're disappointed?

Of course, if you're merely a consumer, you can walk away when you're not satisfied with the service that you're buying. But if you're a participant...if you belong – whether you're formally a member or not – if you think of yourself as belonging – as being a part of this community, then your relationships keep you here through the ups and downs of church life; through the good times and the hard times; through agreements and disagreements. As full participants, you're more likely to focus on what you're giving to the community than on what you're getting from it.

It's not that the individual isn't important here. You are important here in all of your uniqueness. You are precious. You are powerful. There is no one else who has quite the same combination of gifts that you have. But happiness and security depend on there being a balance in our lives between the individual and the community.

If our individual needs and identity are not taken into account at all, we are stifled. We cannot prosper, spiritually or emotionally. But if our individual needs and identity are all that matter, well, as McKibben suggested in our reading this morning, life can be daunting and it can be lonely.

We are social beings, after all. Study after study has shown that when we participate in groups, when we engage in relationships, we are happier, healthier, more satisfied, more secure, and more powerful, *even though such participation requires us to give up some of our freedoms as individuals*. More and more we're learning that true security comes not through ownership – not through what we have – but through relationship.

Snow removal is just one simple metaphor for that truth. Ultimately, it's not my snow blower that makes me happy or secure during a storm. It is my reciprocal relationships with my neighbors that keep me safe and satisfied.

Church consultants often say that people come to churches – and stay in churches – because they have a deep need to belong to something bigger than themselves – bigger than their families. We often come because we want our lives to be transformed in some way, and made more meaningful.

Have you been – or would you like to be – transformed, changed, through your relationship with this community?

Christians talk about dying to self and being born again in Christ. And although our theology is quite different as Unitarian Universalists, that is precisely the kind of transformation that I'm talking about this morning – the kind of change that happens through which our own individual wants seem less and less important, and the needs of the larger body – the community – begin to take precedence. That is how a relationship with a community is meant to change us, if we allow it to.

Will you let it? Will you let it change you? Will you give your heart to this group of people seated around you? Will you cast your lot with this group of individuals who have cast their lot with you? Will you take that leap of faith? Will you take upon you the hopes and dreams of this religious community, and its vision of a world more fair and just – for everyone - and make them yours, too?

I hope that you will, for therein lies the path toward a better, stronger, brighter future, for us all, for our children, and for those others who will come after us.

So may it be.

Amen. And blessed be.