

**“THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY”**  
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**SERMON PART 1:**

Something unusual arrived in my mailbox this week. It was a large and very fancy card, in an elegant black and silver envelope with a ribbon on the face. The font inside was large with Edwardian script and it began “Marcia and Joan request the pleasure of your company on the occasion of their marriage on Saturday, October 3<sup>rd</sup>.” It was wonderful to receive such an elegant invitation to a wedding that I was doing! While this kind of formality still exists for weddings, what we receive as invitations for most everything else these days is e-vites or doodles or web based messages that ask us to respond electronically to a date that’s been set for an event. The pleasure of your company is still what is being requested, but the invitations we receive don’t always expect that your “company” will be experienced in person.

Last Sunday kicked off the theme for month of September that asks the question “what does it mean to be a person of invitation? Three months ago, my husband and co-minister, the Reverend Wayne Arnason, and I were given the chance to find out first hand when we said “yes” to your invitation to serve you this year. We will be physically experiencing the pleasure of your company twice a month; and the rest of the time through the email conference call and Zoom or Skype. Little did we know when these themes were chosen that we would be learning to live into the question of “what does it mean to be a person of invitation?”

At the same time, Wayne and I were inspired to look at a completely different set of themes to preach about for the coming year. We were inspired by an essay, written by the poet David Whyte, entitled “Ten Questions that Have No Right To Go Away.” In his first essay, Whyte asks the reader to ask themselves: “Do I know how to have a real conversation?” So, while working on these two themes, we wanted to reflect what does it mean to be a person of invitation, and particularly a person who invites “real” conversations into your life?

At first glance, the question seems simple enough, because it’s easy to have conversations. We have them all the time. You will probably engage in something we call conversation after service today. You’ll go home and open your email and respond to a question or a comment from a friend or a family member or a blogger or a news story. Invitations into conversation are everywhere in our lives. The television and radio programs and articles are always asking for your opinion; the posts on Facebook and Twitter are shouting at us to respond; and “the pleasure of our company” is requested not only via e-mail threads, but through conference calls, Skype and Zoom.

But if you really think about it, what does all this conversation that we get invited into usually involve? Someone in a group offers an opinion; and then someone else offers their opinion and someone might disagree with one of those opinions or another; but is that a real conversation? For me, it feels more like throwing darts. You throw out an idea that you hope gets close to the imaginary bullseye of truth, and then someone else throws out an idea, but frequently there is no creative relationship between those two darts except that they hit the same dartboard.

Or even worse, the conversation is not like darts – it’s like curling. I don’t know if you know what curling is – (although I did notice that Appleton has their own curling rink) but it’s a sport that’s near and dear to my Canadian in-law’s hearts. In curling, you not only try to get your shot close to that bullseye of truth, but you try to knock out that vulnerable rock of opinion that the last person threw out. Conversations like this don’t have to be the fierce and angry arguments you see in on-line forums all the time. They can be perfectly polite and intelligent but you get the feeling that people aren’t really connecting or creating anything new. They are competing, or they are holding up their end of a social formality. For the shy or introverted person who is in a group where this kind of conversation happens, they often don’t get involved in the conversation at all – they’re a spectator.

So there is confusion among us about the difference between argument, debate, social media engagement and conversation. They are all different ways of enjoying the pleasure of each other’s company, and there is a place for each of them, but the meaning of *company*, and *conversation* is changing. Today’s digital media enables us to be in the company of people from all over the world in our own homes. Our faces and bodies may be quite visible to those with whom you are talking with, but your body is not physically in the room. What difference does that make? Is that really company? What is the relationship between the pleasure of your company and the how the company is made possible? If the medium is the message, as academic techno-prophet Marshall McLuhan taught us, then is face to face conversation a different thing from trying to have a conversation about the same subject through emails, or text messages, or on a Zoom screen?

This year, we – you, Wayne and your ministerial settlement representative are doing something that’s never really been done before. We’re building relationships between minister and congregation both in person and remotely. We are being eyed very carefully by the larger Association to see just how this will work, as the wider association of Unitarian Universalism is contemplating both brick and mortar and virtual or electronic congregations as a new possibility for covenanted communities. All of us are wondering – just how will this work? Can it work? Just as I’m excited about the possibilities of creating new communities, I can’t help but also wonder, if our form of religious community, and especially this form of religious community with congregational rather than hierarchical authority, is, by its nature, a face-to-face community that must rely on real and deep conversation to sustain health and growth. Is there something in the essence and something in the potential of religious community that means it must invite you to a place where you show up in person, with your body, where you are invited to talk every week with strangers and friends alike?

My friends and colleagues at the Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul, MN ask three things of their members to be full partners and participants in the life of that congregation: “to learn and practice a prayerful daily discipline; to develop the intimacy skills necessary to go deep quickly with strangers and then find ways to bless and serve the world.”<sup>1</sup> It’s that phrase “to go deep quickly with strangers that I find the most provocative of all, because it seems counter intuitive. It would seem that the congregation is a place where, over time, you build trust with the people that you know in order to reveal your human self – those things that all human beings share, but whose particular constellation is unique to you at this moment in time. To be “invited to go deep with strangers,” with people you barely know – is a provocative challenge. How do we do that? Where do we start? Remember, Whyte reminds us: Start close in, don't take the second step or

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<sup>1</sup> Turning North, A sermon offered by Rob Eller-Isaacs, February 28, 2010

the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don't want to take. I don't know about you – but for me, as an introvert – there is always this gap between what I feel inside and how I'm longing or able to say it. Sometimes that's the step that I don't want to take, but love of people and a desire for human connection compels me towards speech.

## **SERMON PART 2 –A REAL CONVERSATION**

With each question in David Whyte's "Ten Questions" essay, he offers a brief reflection. His first question "do I know how to have a real conversation" is so provocative because it raises other questions we've been exploring. First – what is a conversation? And then, what makes a conversation "real"? – and different from a game of verbal darts, as Wayne described, or in contrast to those superficial and self-absorbed exchanges of information, which aren't really conversations. We tend to think about conversation as a dialogue between two people, but, we also know there are many ways of "conversing." Although the technical definition is the interchange of ideas through speech, we know that two people speaking in sign language without words are having a conversation. In music, two or more instruments can take up a theme and together, they weave back and forth in musical speech, taking up one point and augmenting it and then carrying the theme to another key and so on until the music is complete and you feel that you've just been listening in on a divine type of communication. A conversation is an exchange of ideas that is built upon really listening to what is being said; then, reflecting on it and then adding something to it that enhances and advances and expands the initial idea. If that's all conversation is, then why are we making it sound like it's so hard to have a "real" conversation with someone? David Whyte considered this question as the parent of a teenage daughter and told a story about a recent experience he had with his daughter that may have prompted his framing his question about real conversation in the first place. He says:

There are many tough conversations, but one of the most difficult is between a parent and an adolescent daughter, partly because as a parent we are almost always attempting to relate to someone who is no longer there. The parent therefore usually tries to start the conversation by offering a perspective that the daughter finds not only out of date but also unhelpful; the daughter then replies by way of defense with something just a shade more unhelpful, and so the process continues. A year or so ago, I found myself in exactly this dynamic, my daughter's bedroom door slamming shut just as I was just about to say that last, deeply satisfying unhelpful thing.

But I caught myself and said, "David, this isn't a real conversation. How do you make this a real conversation?" I gave it the old 10-minute cool down time, walked into the kitchen, made tea and put out a tray, and on the tray: a plate of cookies, a milk pitcher, a cup and a saucer. Then I knocked on her door and said in a very different, more invitational voice, "Come on, Charlotte, I've made tea. Let's go and have a talk."

As soon as I put the tray down and we had sat next to each other, almost by accident I happened to say exactly the right thing—I said, "Charlotte, tell me one thing you'd like me to stop doing as a father. And tell me one thing you'd like me to do more of." She suddenly gazed up at me with a lovely look in her eyes, one I knew from her very early infancy. She was engaged again because at last I was really inviting her to tell me who she had become—not who she had been or who I wanted her to be—but who she was *now*.

I love this story because I think our youth more often than not have a highly tuned "BS" filter. They know when someone is not being real with them. They know when they are being

patronized or when an adult does not really *hear* them because the adult is so invested in the child they were and not the person they are becoming.

For me, a “real” conversation involves at least three things: it involves deep listening! it requires risk! and it demands vulnerability! Let’s “unpack” each of these a little bit.

Deep listening is a discipline that sometimes seems to be almost extinct in our culture today. I’m not sure whether we know how to listen to one another any more. Too often we are so busy anticipating the next word or our own response, that we don’t really hear what’s being said. At the same time, there is a great longing for spiritual practices that help us to listen – both to our own inner voice – or to the voice of God– and to one another. So think about a time when someone really listened to you – cleared away the to-do list and sat down and opened up a space for you and just listened; without feedback or interjection or interruption – remember what that felt like? For me, it felt like a wide Western sky had just opened up. Deep listening is a skill and an art that is we practice in our Journey Groups; allowing for space in between comments; encouraging silence and reflection. I was so impressed this past Wellspring Wednesday by the depth of conversation and sharing often between people who did not know each other very well. There are so few places in our lives these days where deep listening is not only encouraged, but actively practiced and this Fellowship is one place where you get to practice it.

Having a “real” conversation requires risk. Risking what? You risk being known, and being known can be scary. We all have a public face, and a private space, and that public face can even be what we lead with in our most intimate relationships. When I serve as officiant at weddings, couples will often choose as passage from I Corinthians 13. You know the one, where the apostle Paul is writing about love. Love is patient; love is kind he starts out. And often those are the only words that the couples really notice. They don’t listen very carefully to the last part of this well-worn passage. Paul writes: “for now we see through a glass darkly, but then, face to face, now I know in part but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known.” Paul is famous for writing complex and often incomprehensible statements, but this one is actually quite powerful. He’s trying to get at the heart of what it means to be “known.” There are many different interpretations of this, but what intrigues me about that passage is talking with couples about what it means for them to be “known.” In Paul’s mind, he was writing about being fully known and understood by God. For those for whom God is not a very relevant idea, I think it still speaks to our very human longing to be “known,” ...to have someone “get us,” “understand” us, “respect” and “appreciate” us, even if we disagree with an opinion being expressed in a conversation. Being known is not just about appreciating our unique personality; it’s a knowing of the human condition and spirit that transcends even our personalities if we are willing to get real with one another.

In religious community we offer that kind of opportunity – to know and be known, in the company of people who will respect and appreciate you. This invitation to a real conversation is also an invitation to knowing your Self – your true self – and being able to see the face you had before you were born. To risk removing the armor of your guarded self and to be face to face with another is the great gift of real conversation.

So to accept an invitation into real conversation finally requires vulnerability. Start close in – Whyte reminds us. Take the step you do not want to take. Next week, I’ve got a date to have a conversation with Chief of Police Todd Thomas based on his post and the ministry team’s response to that post. Will it be a “real” conversation? I don’t yet know. Every conversation can have an agenda behind it; every conversation that we have runs the risk of saying the wrong thing, hurting another person or being misunderstood. I don’t know what will happen. I don’t yet

fully know what I'm going to say. But I do know that an invitation to deeper conversation was extended to me this weekend and it would have felt hypocritical of me not to preach this sermon and then not accept it! This is not the entrée I had imagined to Appleton, but you know, we don't get to choose what life brings to us. We do get to choose how to respond – with wisdom, with caution yes, but also with a sense of curiosity to more fully know another – and be more fully known.

This is what we do in this Fellowship. We accept the invitation to explore the depth dimensions of life by virtue of showing up and being here whenever we can week after week. We take a chance on showing people who we are and we risk that first step in opening up real conversations that matter. We engage members of the Healthy Congregations Team if we find it difficult to talk with one another. As human beings we are creatures of meaning; we long for and crave knowing and being truly known by one another, and the best way I know how to do this is by engaging in real, honest, risky and vulnerable conversations. This is the way we build a friendship, a marriage, a religious community and a life.

So this is our pledge to you this year. During our time at the Fellowship, we will try our best not to miss any opportunity that comes our way to “get real” with each another – to listen deeply, to take risks, and to be vulnerable, and we hope that you will consider this pledge as well. It won't always be easy. There will be things that we may do or say this year that may be seen as challenging to your identity, but I trust that what is even more important in this process is talking to one another. So, I hope you consider this a formal invitation to enjoy the pleasure of your company in a real conversation. Not just throwing darts at one another, or casting that curling stone on and hoping it will knock around some opinions, but real, honest, heartfelt conversation. It will make all the difference as we journey through this year together. Come and go with us. May it be so.

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