

***Love is the Doctrine of our Fellowship***  
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When I first walked in these front doors in 2004, it was like I was coming home. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I found what I was seeking. There is an incredible energy here that made me feel immediately comfortable, even though I didn't know anyone. I don't remember what the sermon was that day, but I do remember Jeanne Van Bronkhorst. She was a member who led a little orientation for newcomers that day. I remember her joy and excitement, and how she and the other people here obviously loved this place and each other. That day I fell in love with this community and I didn't even belong to it yet.

I have been thinking a lot about how the Fellowship is more than any one person. Maybe some of you have been thinking about this too lately. This may be most obvious at a time when we have said goodbye to a beloved Senior Minister, the Rev. Roger Bertschausen, after 24 years of ministry and are about to welcome the Rev. Christina Leone-Tracy as our new settled Senior Minister; this Fellowship has always been more than the minister. Roger had to work on this throughout his ministry. When he started in 1990, there were 100 members and he was the only staff person. He was at every committee meeting, he came early to service to set up chairs, everything that happened at that time could have looked like it revolved around him. But it didn't. Other than a two year extension ministry, the Fellowship lay leadership had been doing everything up until that point—including planning and leading services, so they were still very involved in keeping this place running.

And we grew. We got more staff. More programs, meant more lay leaders. More people helping make decisions and keeping the Fellowship moving forward. If you ask a group of Fox Valley people what they think of when they hear the words Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, some community members would say Roger Bertschausen. But many wouldn't—you would also hear that we are welcoming, that we are dedicated to social justice, that we have had a series of active ministers, that our people are everywhere in this community – from the public education system to the libraries, nonprofit sector, corporate world, social services, local musicians and artists, the list goes on.

The Fellowship started in 1955 with 9 Founders and started chartering members in 1957. The membership book from that year states that the purpose of the Fellowship shall be to join its members into a religious and educational fellowship to develop human character and personal responsibility, to further individual freedom of belief and to advance liberal religion through study, service and spiritual consecration. I love this statement. It is a beautiful way of describing who we were, but also who we are. The last line includes two of the three parts of our current mission statement: Growing in Mind and Spirit and Leading in Social Justice.

In thinking more about who we've been and what has stayed the same, I have realized not only have we held true to many core values and ways of being, they have evolved. One of my favorite examples is the children's story Terry Dawson shared today. He has been sharing Abiyoyo's story for many years. I couldn't wait to have my son Nate be old enough to hear the story and have it be part of his life. Terry has always introduced the story in the same way: he learned it from Alan West, who learned it from Pete Seeger, who adapted it from an African song. Terry won't always be the one who tells the story, of course, and he is "teaching" Jay Thomas to take over for him, who unfortunately isn't here today to take the baton. I am sure Jay will do some things differently, as Terry does things differently from Alan. This is one example of a beloved tradition that has and will change.

There are, of course, also examples of bigger things that have been at our core, but yet evolved. One of the values that is most important to *me* that we continue to uplift is being welcoming.

If our 9 founding members, and those that came after, hadn't been welcoming for most of our history, we would not exist today, like many congregations that started in what was called the Fellowship movement in the 1950s. It's not always intentional, but it can often be because the people within the group want to stay like a family and know everyone. This is tempting—many of us have felt it here when we walk into a room and don't know anyone. Thankfully that feeling of being closed to newcomers never happened, otherwise most of us in this room wouldn't have the Fellowship to be part of.

While the spirit of our welcoming nature has stayed relatively the same, the process has had to change. It's a very different process for someone new when there are 30 people vs. 300 vs. the more than 700 we have today. In the over 11 years I have been in my position, I have tried a lot of new things, and certainly feel like we do a lot well. We are a very fast growing congregation, which speaks to our welcoming nature, but it also brings unique challenges. This next year could be one of the biggest years in the Fellowship's history, but if we don't do some very basic things well, we could easily lose the same amount of people. If people don't make friends and find connections pretty quickly, they won't keep coming, no matter how good the services are and how dynamic the minister is. While I will never say it is easy work, it is rather simple.

I invite you to close your eyes, if you are comfortable. Think about the first time you came to the Fellowship. It may have been years ago or it may be today. What were you hoping for when you first came? What did you experience? What would have made that experience better?

I invite you to open your eyes. I was fortunate enough to take a month long sabbatical this past February. A sabbatical is time away from your normal job to rest and renew, and also often a time for learning. The majority of my time was spent doing professional development (including reading several books that had been on my bookshelf for quite a while and watching endless webinars), but I also visited several area churches. It was quite a learning experience, and I missed this place more during those Sunday mornings than any other time! One of the churches I attended had been highly spoken of. I took my son, Nate. When we walked in, the Director of Christian Education, the staff equivalent of our Director of Religious Education, greeted us warmly. She paid special attention to Nate, which we both appreciated. We found the

sanctuary, and were handed programs from smiling Ushers. After the service, we were invited to stay for treats, so we went to their gathering area, which was a beautiful living room type area with an array of homemade treats. Everything sounds good, so far, right? At that point, and in the 5 minutes or so while we stood there until I couldn't take it anymore, not one non-staff person talked to us. I felt like the most visible invisible person in the world. It was a terrible feeling. There was no doubt we were new – it's a pretty small congregation. There were people there who could have said hello, but they didn't.

I know this happens here. It may have happened to you, and you just relived that experience during the little meditation I had you do. I want it to never happen again and I need your help in making sure it doesn't. The staff and ministers do our best to make sure people have as good of an experience here as possible. There is only so much we can do, but it is also critical that this work is done by everyone. Having you all approach people you haven't met shows them that not only are there friendly people here, but that they can make actual friends here. It shows them that they can find true community here. So I am asking you all to be on the lookout for people on their own. All you have to do is greet them by saying, "I don't believe we have met". We say this because they may not be new! They just may not know anyone yet. Ask them what they thought of the service. Ask them if they are involved in anything. Share what you love about the Fellowship. Introduce them to someone else.

I love the mission/vision statements that the board recently put out that we had for our reading today. I feel like we are being asked to evolve some more. The pertinent part reads:

**Welcoming Everyone:** We will engage deeply in the challenging work of examining our own assumptions, biases and privilege. We will reach out to each other and the wider, borderless community with radical kindness and hospitality.

This is much bigger than just saying hi to everyone walking in the door! When I first read this, I thought, "WOW—that is a big message in a short statement! Let's do this!"

I went back to my some of my favorite quotes from the book called *Radical Hospitality* by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt and found this one:

"Genuine spirituality is not cozy, and seldom makes you comfortable. It challenges, disturbs, unsettles, and leaves you feeling like someone is at the center of your existence on a major remodeling mission. While affirming how wonderful you are, better than you really know, spirituality is also meant to change you." I felt this way after being at the Fellowship for a while. The opportunities for what my spiritual life could look like exploded from everything I learned here.

And this quote: "When we create a life surrounded by people like us, it is a narrow life. We will not be challenged by such a life. A spirituality centered around such a life will be lazy and complacent. It allows us to settle for easy answers based solely on personal experience."

That one hit me hard. I have absolutely been in a bubble for much of the last 10 years, and prior to that in many ways as well. It is easy to explain it away—my work is all encompassing, and it is

hard to find the time to get away from my ministry here. I love you all, and I love my job, but I also need to make opportunities to get outside that lazy and complacent (in Lonni and Father Dan's words) world. I have had more than one reminder of this in the last year—with the lead up to the election and the aftermath since, as well as our local community's response to just hanging a banner that stated Black Lives Matter and more recently the discussion of white supremacy. This has been a hard phrase for me, as it may be for you. As I've been learning about the difference between white supremacists and white supremacy culture, I realize there is so much I don't know. I included an article that has been helpful to me in the weekly scroll last week that lists characteristics of white supremacy culture, and I fit right into many of them. The sense of perfectionism, fear of open conflict, and individualism\* are just a few. This is the culture I was raised in, and so of course it would be comfortable to me. Every school setting, my family environment, and all of my friend's homes fed into these characteristics. I think the one that has caused the most hard is the fear of open conflict. This has affected many of my relationships negatively in the past and I realize it still continues in my family of origin. It has been and will continue to be challenging to overhaul these tendencies, but I know it is essential for healthy relationships and to live in the world today. This work of learning about and fighting that culture is the genuine spirituality that is doing that major remodeling mission that I mentioned before.

Our congregation is being asked to give up some of our comfort by becoming a Sanctuary Congregation. While my staff portfolio does not include social justice, it does, of course, include welcome and radical hospitality of all people, so I jumped at the chance to be on the Shared Sanctuary Committee. The Fellowship was a Sanctuary Congregation in the 1980s and it's hard to believe that that our political culture is forcing us to do consider doing this again. While we don't know what kind of sanctuary we are going to provide, it could mean housing one or more people for an indefinite period of time in this building. This is not going to be convenient for us – it would mean asking one of our Religious education classes to move into the lobby. It would also mean asking our groups to be quieter in the hallways at night. But it would mean that person or family would have a little more safety from being sent back to their country of origin that is unsafe for them to return to.

This is that type of spirituality that is not cozy or comfortable, but challenging, and I welcome that.

I have often thought about how the Fellowship community has stayed healthy for so much of our history. In talking with some of those I would call "elders" of the Fellowship – those who have been part of the Fellowship for decades, they share that there has always a vision of thinking big and planning well. We also have typically had good transparency and communication. Of course, there have been challenges when this was not the case. Because of one of those challenging times, we got a beautiful document: Our Principles for a Healthy Congregation, which is listed in your Order of Service.\*

Since this is only the second time I have given a sermon here, I can say that it is part of my tradition to talk about this document. One of the areas I learned much more about during my sabbatical is congregational polity. Congregational polity is how we are connected to each

other. All denominations have this: the beliefs, structures, doctrines that hold us together. While spirituality can be practiced alone, religion cannot. The Latin root of the word religion is “to bind” and the Greek root is “to heed.” Unitarian Universalism compels us to claim and be claimed by our faith. Congregational polity includes the covenant that we make to one another. One way to think about covenant is membership in the congregation is like a wedding, covenanting to that congregation is like a marriage. Our Unitarian Universalist congregational polity goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century with a document called the Cambridge Platform. If you want to learn more about this fabulous document, I put links into the weekly scroll last week.

Unitarian Universalist congregations often have a covenant that members agree to, and some say their covenant aloud in every service. If the Fellowship has a covenant, it would be our Principles for a Healthy Congregation. Interesting side note, I recently learned that it was a very intentional decision not to use the word covenant on this document as all of the founders who were still here in 2001 when the document was written were very against using that word. I would like for us to consider claiming this word, which is such an important part of Unitarian Universalism. Our covenant is not a contract. It is not to be used to call someone out for noncompliance, but a way try again.

How do we hold true to our core values? How do we continue to evolve and grow? We do this through intention, through loving each other and our community. By allowing mistakes and not giving up. We are all asked not just to read and vote on our mission and vision, but to live these values. I invite you to covenant with me and with each other to live these values fully. To use the Principles for a Healthy Congregation to help us know how to be together. To keep learning about white supremacy culture and finding ways to combat it. To live a life full of love and radical hospitality - when you are at the Fellowship and beyond these walls. It is good to be together. May it be so.

\*White Supremacy Culture from Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001

[http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC\\_site\\_B/dr-culture.html](http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html)

\*Principles for a Healthy Congregation Document

<http://fvuuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/Principles-for-a-Healthy-Congregation.pdf>

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