

On Community

A homily by Geoffrey Gomery

July 14, 2013

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I started writing this homily last month, while Louise, Rupert and I were on a ‘cruise and learn’ course aboard a 31’ sailboat in the Gulf Islands. We were learning the art and craft of sailing and motoring, docking and anchoring, a vessel one can live aboard or drown in (or from) and we were also on holiday. I had always thought of the Gulf Islands as interesting bits of land separated by water. I began to see them as interesting bits of land connected by water. In the evenings we anchored in tree-lined bays, with other boats anchored near-by, or sometimes we tied up at a float in a marina. Inevitably, there were other people with all these other boats, and I was introduced to the community of boaters: people from a very wide variety of walks of life who share, at the least, an inordinate interest in tomorrow’s weather forecast. It was a bit like joining a secret society, as it were – they are present among us – albeit as temporary and probationary members.

Boaters are a community. Strangers in a marina nod and make eye contact in a friendlier way than would take place on the street. Boaters help one another. They call for help from time to time, sometimes in distress on the high seas, and more often at the dock, in the most mundane ways. Can you help me with this line? In the presence of outsiders, boaters keep their squabbles to themselves, for the most part. We are members of many such communities and tribes, defined by occupations, interests, identities and, of course, geography. The essence of community is that there is something held in common.

I started thinking about this homily long before our boating adventure as an attempt to resolve some of the ambivalence I feel about this, my religious community. I’m a rationaliser. Viewed as a coping mechanism, rationalisation has a bad name, which I’d like to think is not entirely well deserved. In any event, it is my coping mechanism of choice. If I can name and explain a thing that is bothering or puzzling me, then I can deal with it and sleep well at night.

We started coming here on Sunday mornings 18 years ago, in the summer of 1995. It was almost 2 months before I even saw the minister and the services seemed ... eclectic. We signed the membership book and became members at some point that fall. I wasn't joining this church for community – that is, I wasn't looking for a group of people with whom I would share something important to me, something religious – at least not directly. We started coming for the RE programme for our children, Sasha then 2 years old and Rupert a babe in arms, but what drew me in were the services.

This was not what I had expected. Having grown up Anglican and given up attendance at Sunday services because I couldn't see the point of them; having concluded that I was an agnostic as to the Anglican creed and every other creed I encountered; having arrived at a point at which organised religion seemed irrelevant to my life; having adopted a theological stance, to the extent that I had a theology, that assigned religion to a private, personal sphere, and religious practice, words and deeds, to a more public realm, and not discerning any necessary connection between the two; I was surprised and bemused – gobsmacked may be the better word – to be drawn into the rituals of Sunday morning worship in this sanctuary. I was in my mid-thirties. In my teens, Sunday mornings were for sleeping. In my twenties, there were Sunday morning newspapers. In my thirties, Louise and I had young children to care for and a continuing sequence of things to do on Sundays and every other day of the week. Sunday services made sense to me. They offered an hour of calm, bounded by ritual, to reflect on larger things. The children were off in child care. This space was exactly what I needed. Though the children are now taller than I am, I still need the space. But I certainly didn't conceive my need as a need for community.

What brought me in was personal and selfish, but I recognized that there was an obligation being incurred. These services don't happen by themselves and there is a great deal of work involved in running this church. I had lots of experience with volunteer organisations and a good idea of what was involved. About a year after we joined, I thought, I'd better do my bit. I volunteered to join the Worship Services Committee. That was my committee of choice because, for me, worship was what this place was

about. One thing led to another and pretty soon I was on the board, and my understanding of this community evolved as I was drawn into its affairs. As the board member tells us from this pulpit weekly, there's a lot going on around here. Worship is only a part of it.

Why do it? Why immerse oneself in the messiness and toil of community life – work parties and long committee meetings, and the odd personality clash – when the services (or whatever else you want) are open to the public and free to attend? I've spoken of it as an obligation, but why think of it that way?

For some of you, perhaps most of you, that question may not make sense. Unlike me, maybe you came here for the experience of being with people, the community as an end in itself. The burdens of community may be different, in your case, but burdens there are for all of us. Community life is burdensome because it requires that we give of ourselves without getting anything direct or tangible in return.

The question is particularly acute in the case of intentional communities, such as this one. I am a member of my neighbourhood community because of where I live, regardless of how or whether I interact with my neighbours. I'm a member of the legal community because I work as a lawyer. I was a member of the boating community for a little while, and may be again, because I took a sailing course. Even today, there are religious communities one is born into, that require a very deliberate act of will to escape. That is not the case of Unitarian Universalism. Even if one is raised UU, this denomination and this particular community requires a continuing affirmative commitment, with the added complexity of substantial disagreement as to just what it is we are committing to. It is the ultimate liberal religion or, as my sons might put it, a 'meta' religion, in which the religious commitment, the thing that binds, has more to do with a process of inquiry than the answers one obtains.

Look at the principles and purposes at the front of the hymnal. There is a focus on 'human relations' (number 2), 'acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth' (number 3), a 'free and responsible search for truth and meaning' (number 4), the

‘democratic process’ (number 5) and ‘the goal of world community’ (number 6). With these principles and purposes, it sounds as though the important thing that is held in common is the experience of being in community, walking together, as an end in itself. But this doesn’t answer my question: why should I take this on? Reasoning that I should be in community for the purpose of being in community is circular.

I don’t want to overlook two of the principles and purposes, which seem a little less ‘meta’. They are numbers 1 – ‘the inherent worth and dignity of every person’ – and 7 – ‘respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part’. They present a significant moral stance, the first echoing Kant’s categorical imperative. They reflect the fact that Unitarian Universalism is about more than just the experience of being in community. But the experience of community is certainly an important part of how we conceive ourselves. And there are many ways one could commit oneself to the pursuit of principles and purposes numbers 1 and 7 without joining a UU community.

I have to confess that I struggle with a certain misanthropic tendency that seems to be getting more acute as I get older and more confident in my judgments. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I am an introvert. Or, more likely, perhaps it has something to do with my intellectual contrariness, according to which it is almost impossible for me to listen to somebody without confronting all the reasons why what he or she is saying is arguably incorrect. I spend much time in services silently disagreeing with what is being said. I say that so that you will know that I think it’s only fair if you are disagreeing with me right now. That’s what I would be doing. It is an essentially intellectual reflex, no doubt exacerbated by my work as a lawyer.

I seldom dislike people, though I often dislike what they’re saying, which sometimes makes services quite tiring: I’m listening and formulating a rebuttal, while struggling to continue listening and to appreciate the truth in what is being said. No one comes to this pulpit to express anything other than their truth. Services therefore offer me a regular reminder that the profound truths of others are not my truth and, so long as I am honest with myself, that I may be wrong. I am challenged to articulate, at least to myself, why I

think I am right. Sometimes I come and hear a homily and agree with every word of it. I learn a great deal that way. More often I hear a homily and agree with parts and disagree with parts. I learn even more from those homilies, if I work at it. Very occasionally, the parts I disagree with outweigh the parts I agree with, and the work becomes quite difficult.

It's not that I believe that truth is subjective. I believe in the reality of the material world and in the probable existence of an objective moral reality. Mathematicians speak of an existence proof. Quite often, it is possible to prove that a certain mathematical entity exists, or that a certain problem has a solution, without knowing what the answer is. So there are objective truths, but our ability to access them is inadequate, our perceptions imperfect and our reasoning flawed. We disagree in good faith. We disagree about the things that are most important to us.

Being in community sharpens my engagement in a difficult process. A commitment to this religious community encourages me not to let go, to zone out, when confrontation with the truths of others becomes uncomfortable, as it does. It encourages me in an intellectual and spiritual discipline. So here is my first answer to the question, why commit myself to this religious community? Community makes it real. Being in community keeps me from ducking out, or from limiting my engagement to something purely abstract. When I know the person who is speaking, have spent time with working through a difficult budget discussion with her and have seen her children grow up, then her inherent worth and dignity is not an idea but an experienced fact. I have to take her seriously.

We can contrast such a community with the virtual communities we are all exposed to on the Internet. The Internet exposes us to an inconceivable diversity of human experience, opinion and belief. It is possible to find people of unusual or quirky beliefs, forcefully held. The paradoxical consequence is that virtual communities of belief tend to be narrowly focused and lacking in diversity. People join with others of shared beliefs, and if one is not comfortable with the opinions being expressed, one leaves. People leave this

community, too, but the multi-dimensionality of our relationships makes it a more consequential decision.

We live important parts of our lives alone, and sometimes when we are with other people, we feel alone. We feel our own uniqueness and we admire the uniqueness of others. As I've already mentioned, as Unitarian Universalists, one of our core commitments other than our commitment to community is our covenant to affirm and uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person, each in his or her isolated splendour. We are the heirs of religious dissidents, people who insisted that no one would tell them what to believe, and our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning and the right of conscience honours their legacy. No one tells any one of us what to believe. We are left to figure things out by ourselves. Is there a God? Do people have souls? Does something of us survive after death? To these and countless other important questions, in this church, you make the call. There is no religious authority or, put another way, each and every one of us is an authority.

This makes us an unusual religion while putting us squarely in the main current of Western intellectual discourse since the Enlightenment. In a debate that has been going on for over 400 years, our spiritual ancestors began as lonely dissidents and we find ourselves today expressing principles and purposes that are totally uncontroversial. Read the *British Columbia Human Rights Code*, whose stated purpose is 'to promote a climate of understanding and mutual respect where all are equal in dignity and rights' (s 3(b)). There is equivalent legislation in every province. Look at the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (s 2): freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of thought, opinion, belief and expression, freedom of association. These were once radical ideas. In Canada today, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who would argue against them.

When we imagine ourselves as individuals, exalting our individuality, we miss something. It is that we are not only individuals. We have a social nature as well, and to ignore it, to pretend that the individual is all that matters, is to profoundly misunderstand

ourselves and our place in the universe. This might be viewed as the great intellectual error of the Enlightenment.

This error is our tendency to view the individual as existing independently of society. *Homo sapiens* is a political animal, as Aristotle observed. Baruch Spinoza made a similar observation, that men:

... are scarcely able to lead a solitary life, so that the definition of man as a social animal has met with general assent; in fact, men do derive from social life much more convenience than injury.

(*Ethics IV*, proposition 35) We live in society, and we are affected much more than we realise by the societies we live in. Robinson Crusoe captures the imagination precisely because he is so unusual, and he is not a person without a society, he is just someone who has been dislocated from the society in which he belongs and is anxious to return to it.

An equivalent error to viewing the individual in isolation from society is to view our species as wholly unique and independent of the plants, animals and ecosystem upon which we rely. We are embedded in nature and cannot exist apart from her. Yet we persist in governing ourselves as though only people matter, with no regard for the broader consequences of our actions. This might be viewed as the great intellectual error of the modern era, and one of considerable practical consequence.

All this is very high minded and I think that I may have a further answer to the question, why engage in religious community, that may be more meaningful to those of you (which will be most of you, I assume) who are not afflicted by my contrary disposition.

Membership in this community is a bittersweet experience. I am 54 years old, my parents, aunts and uncles are still all alive, my professional peers are all engaged in their careers; and every year I mark the passing of people I knew well, in this community. My sons are now venturing forth into the wider world, this year I attended my last parent teacher interview (without so much as a twinge of regret), and every year I see babies

being born here among us, and children passing from child care to Sunday school to the youth group.

The great English poet and cleric, John Donne, wrote his 'Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions' in 1623, meditating on an illness in which he had thought he might die. He wrote of hearing the church bell ringing (Devotion XVII):

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls, may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. ... The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute, that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God. Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? But who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell, which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell, which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to see for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

Just as we are all interesting individual islands, we are connected by society. Community, particularly religious community, brings those connections home. We hear the bell ringing, we hear the child cry, and we know what each portends.

In ancient Rome, when the Senate wished to honour a victorious general, he was awarded a Triumph, a victory parade through the streets, preceded by a train of captives and loot, while surrounded by cheering Romans. The general proceeded proudly forward, followed by a person whose job it was to lean forward, and whisper, repeatedly, 'Remember, you are mortal'. I could wish for a Triumph of my own, even a small one, but this community, all of you, do the same for me, not the cheering, but the much more important job of reminding: I am mortal, we all are mortal, we are born, mature, grow old and die, and we do so surrounded by people who love us, when we let them. May it be so.

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14 July 2013