

**Reflections on Being a Faith Community**  
**Rev. Betty Kornitzer**  
**February 6, 2005**  
**The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County**

I open with a reading from the poetry of Jennifer Bosveld:

*Called*

*Whether in the darkness or in the light, at some point in our lives we have been called.*

Called by something over the horizon, called by something at odds in the world, called by something that felt exactly right within.

We are called to brave change, celebrate paradox, invite the joy, and value sorrow.

Called to encourage new voices in the debate, to love where love is difficult, to investigate where wisdom hides.

Called to wage peace in every action, to carry the flag of the world, to pledge allegiance to the planet.

Called to do what is life affirming.

Called to sit lower than anyone who is struggling, higher than those in control, to never negotiate with evil.

Called to calculate and accept my fair share, to respect whose turn it is, not to be patient waiting for justice.

Called to draw a larger circle, to develop a unique relationship with the world.

Perhaps these words strike a chord in your heart. Perhaps they feel, somehow, familiar - like an echo from within.

Was there something that called you to this place? To this particular community of faith? Or, who know - maybe you're here because you have this thing about old American Legion Bingo Halls.

Of course, I was literally called to serve as your minister. I accepted your call because I experienced you as a faith community with abundant gifts of the energy and love and creativity and beauty. And next Sunday I will be installed as your first settled minister – I'm pretty excited. When I told my oldest grandson that I was being installed, he scrunched up his face and said: "Installed? What are you, Grandma, a car engine?" I'm afraid I've become a bit of a family joke with the younger set. That's okay, I can handle it, we know that this installation is a joyful time, a holy time.

So, something called you here – to the American Legion Hall of all places! And you stayed. You stayed in spite of the weekly sweeping up of cigarette butts, the breaking down of twenty odd very heavy tables and the setting up of a hundred odd chairs at 8:30 every Sunday morning. You stayed, and I believe it is because something here called to you – something about community and something about faith.

Community is represented by the symbol of the circle, like our closing circle at the end of Sunday services. The circle is unbroken, it is unified, healthy and complete.

Now, some of you may be aware that this is Super Bowl Sunday. Honestly, I lived most of my life without ever watching a football game, but for some years now, I've loved a man who loves his football, and now I'm right there with him, an avid fan. I'm fascinated by the Patriots, now there's a community, a group that communicates, is unified, healthy and complete – and they never seem to complain – now, that's a rarity in sports. All I hear about these guys is what fantastic team players they are. There are no prima donnas, isn't that amazing, with so much star talent on the team. Each player does his job – sometimes defensive players run offense, and visa versa – they mix it up – they work together, they are a team, and all they seem to do is win games. Perhaps their secret is each player's commitment to the team as a whole, an essential element of community – like I said, no prima donnas. It is all about relationship.

I believe that relationship is the nucleus of all existence, and that humanity hungers for connection. It's probably built right into our cellular structure, so we might as well get used to it. - A disclaimer here, this is metaphor – I am no scientist. But really – this hunger for connection *is* somehow physical, we feel it in our bones, in our skin. We yearn for touch. And so, we seek community. I believe that the entire cosmos is unified and one, and that our greatest delusion is the belief that we are separate.

In Alice Walker's work, The Color Purple, the character Shug, comes to understand our essential unity. She says:

*“My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet, and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried, and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.”*

In an unguarded moment, have you known that feeling of being a part of everything and not separate at all? Have you tasted our oneness, and held it melting on your tongue? It is perhaps our one great truth, and to be savored. A few years ago I was working at a church where I was going to lead the service to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I told the music director that at the end of the service I'd like to congregation to form a circle, hold hands and sing “We Shall Overcome.” He just said “No holding hands, Betty.” I paused and reflected and then I said “Well, you know, I'm sorry, but there are folks out in those pews who haven't felt a human touch all week – so we're gonna' have to hold hands, we're gonna' have to connect.”

Community is about connection, it's not just about folks getting together. You *know* a gathering is a community when you can feel its heartbeat.

Dr. M. Scott Peck says “We bandy around the word “community.” We apply it to almost any collection of individuals – a town, a church, a fraternal organization, an apartment complex, a professional organization, regardless of how poorly those individuals communicate with each other. It is a false use of the word.” Peck says that community is a group of people “who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure.” According to Peck, true communities are inclusive, they “make use of and celebrate the differences among people as gifts.”

As I live and work among you, the heartbeat of this congregation stirs my spirit so. It is powerful and clear and consistent. Your generosity to the Florida Hurricane Relief Fund, and aid to the Tsunami survivors taught me so much about who you are. Your hearts are open, you are a community where you walk your faith. In the snowstorms and throughout the busy holiday season, I sometimes worried that some people needs might fall through the cracks. I needn't have worried – your heartbeat is powerful, clear and consistent. You were always there before me tending to our beloved community. Honestly, we are an amazing connected community.

Did you realize that almost half of our members belong to Small Group Ministries? And I know that is one of the reasons that we are so well connected. The purpose of Small Group Ministry is to help the church to fulfill its work as a faith community, and just what does that mean? I'd say

that it means giving our hearts and our spirits, our time and our energies to expressing with our lives and our actions the principles of our faith.

It is also the purpose of SGM to promote reflective adult conversation within a religious context. That means to share faith's struggle together. To grapple together with the tough questions and the tough times and the tough people, because we are a church, and that is what we do.

Today, at 11:30, our Small Group Ministry Facilitators will Offer a 40 minute workshop on the SGM program, including a participatory simulation of a SGM session. If you are not involved in SGM, it would be worth your while to go find out what half of our members and friends are already doing to build connections.

Perhaps you've noticed that I am always referring to us as a people of faith. And you may have been thinking to yourselves – Come on, Betty, we're UU's, just what are you talking about? Well, you know, just because we do not adhere to a particular religious creed, does not mean that we are non believers. I see faith as a passage, an unfolding of the spirit. Thus, being a faith community is not so much about what we do, as it is about the consciousness with which we do it. This is well expressed by Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg the author of a book entitled Faith. She explains that in the Pali language, the word for "faith" is "saddha," which literally means "to place the heart upon." I think that is so utterly beautiful – when we have faith – a belief – we place our heart upon it.

Listen – and feel this –

"I place my heart upon the inherent dignity and worth of every person."

"I place my heart upon the goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all."

"I place my heart upon respect for the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part."

Isn't that exquisite.

Can you doubt that we are a people of faith, my friends?

Friends, here we are a community of faith – I know because I can feel the heartbeat – I trust that you are here because you can feel it too.

A community of faith is a place you come to grow a soul – it is a place where you stay to share in its unfolding.

*Oh God of Many Names, I pray for the life and health and the heartbeat of this  
community of faith.*

*May we place our hearts upon Love,*

*May we place our hearts upon Peace,*

*May we be guided always by Compassion.*

Blessed Be & Amen