

Getting to Know You

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Milt and I went on a road trip in July to visit various friends and family members in Meadville, Columbus, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and New Martinsville, West Virginia. So far no one has written to complain, but they must have noticed that parts of their newspapers were missing from the exact days we were staying with them. It seems that I cannot resist saving articles and editorials that might, someday, possibly, turn out to be applicable to a sermon topic, and since this year I have thought about my entire year's sermon schedule in advance, that means I see connections in virtually everything I read and hear. For this morning's sermon, it's a perspective by New York Times columnist David Brooks, from the July 25 edition of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, titled "I connect, therefore I am." For a person whose entire theology has to do with relationships, this is a catchy title. Thank you Jerry and Alayne Harris for your contribution to my ministry – I hope there wasn't something in Section B you wanted to save.

I connect, therefore I am. Peter Singer, a Princeton ethicist, says that we are human beings when we are born, but that our "personhood" only begins when we start to relate – with the face of our parents, with the voice of our siblings, with the child next door brought over for a play-date. David Brooks' op-ed goes into the emerging science behind the connections between human minds – "that when people communicate they send out little flares into each other's brains. Friends and lovers create feedback loops of ideas and habits and ways of seeing the world." Think about someone you have known well or spent a lot of time with who is now gone. Whether gone from this town or gone from this world, there are parts of your brain that contain parts of their's. Part of their "self" is now a part of you because you were connected. You can liken this to the "entanglement theory" of physics: particles once in relationship retain their connection, no matter how far apart they are.

We are profoundly shaped by our relationships with each other. When we talk, and get to know each other, what you think becomes a part of my repertoire of experience on that particular topic, whether conscious or not. The article concludes, "It's not exactly new to say that no man is an island. But [now] hundreds of scientists and scholars [are] showing how interconnectedness actually works. What's being described [by these cognitive scientists] is a vast web of information – some contained in genes, some in brain structure, some in the flow of dinner conversation – that joins us to our ancestors and reminds the living of the presence of the dead."

David Brooks' illustration had to do with the science of how our loved ones live on in us, something we have intuited and frequently talk about at memorial services. My point, today, has more to do with the living, with how the relationships we are creating within this community sitting here this morning are changing our lives, now and forever into the future. Part of the person next to you is now a part of you, because you have connected. My emphasis, today and always, is that in our diversity and our different ideas and ways

of thinking and doing, we each add to the wholeness of the other and of the community. We are more complete because of each other. I am more fully alive because of all and each of you.

So, the question becomes, how can we make the most of our relationships, given their importance and influence on our lives. It would seem that how we communicate with each other is pretty important, and indeed, we have talked about this before on Sunday morning. In one of my first sermons for you I held up how difficult it is, with the limits of language alone, to always say what it is we really want someone to hear.

Victor Borge is credited as having said “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” And in that vein I just have to read something very funny, sent to me by one of you. It’s a bit of a detour from the topic, but it is an illustration of the learning curve for clear and effective communication. It’s one of those internet chuckles that go around.....and around.

Every year English teachers from across the USA can submit their collections of actual analogies and metaphors found in high school essays. These excerpts are published each year to the amusement of teachers across the country. Here are last year’s winners.

Her face was a perfect oval, like a circle that had its two sides gently compressed by a Thigh Master.

His thoughts tumbled in his head, making and breaking alliances like underpants in a dryer without Cling Free.

She grew on him like she was a colony of E. coli, and he was room-temperature roast beef.

She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like that sound a dog makes just before it throws up.

He was as tall as a six-foot, three-inch tree.

From the attic came an unearthly howl. The whole scene had an eerie, surreal quality, like when you’re on vacation in another city and Jeopardy comes on at 7:00 instead of 7:30.

Learning to communicate effectively is definitely part of the equation for good relationships. The other part, of course, is learning to listen.

I have a distinct memory of my brother and I, lying on our stomachs in front of the television set (it would have been the late 1950s or maybe early 1960s) watching I Love Lucy or My Three Sons, or maybe Gilligan’s Island. I was young (born in 1951) but I can still feel how frustrated I was when the whole episode revolved around a situation

caused by one person misunderstanding another person. And that always seemed to be the case. No one took the time to check to see if they had heard correctly, or find out if that was really what was meant. Jumping to conclusions drove me crazy – even then! Just go back and talk to each other!

That's why, in one of the very first sermons I wrote for you, I introduced at least one possible alternative behavior: listening with what I called a "forgiving ear." A forgiving ear is one that has personal empathy for the difficulties of communication, and tries to listen with understanding, that asks for clarification, for example, instead of jumping to conclusions based on misunderstood, or misstated words. I have always appreciated those of you who come to me with something you thought you heard in a sermon, and give me the opportunity to explain in other words what you have heard in a way I did not intend. And, there are those occasions when I do unintentionally misspeak, and very much appreciate your thoughtful corrections. A forgiving ear can make a very big difference in the dynamics of relationships. It depends on what you're listening for.

Another concept I want to introduce today is called "appreciative listening." You may have already heard of it – I didn't make this one up. But I did find that there are many different understandings of exactly what appreciative listening is! For some it's listening to music for the sheer pleasure of it. For others it is listening with the intention of finding certain information that will appreciate in value for us or help us meet our needs and goals. One description of appreciate listening referred to dog training. With the first two I could make some kind of a connection to my own definition. I wasn't so sure about the dog training reference though.

Here are some of the qualities I attribute to appreciative listening:

- It's a kind of listening that relates what we are hearing to our own lives.
- It's listening that empowers the speaker and affirms the worth and dignity of their existence and experiences.
- It's listening that is attentive to both the body language of the speaker as well as to what they might not be saying, or what is being communicated in their silence.
- Appreciative listening is empathic listening. You actually feel what the speaker is feeling. (I sometimes do this much too well, especially when it comes to Hallmark commercials or ads for dog and cat food. I can feel exactly what the advertisement is trying to make me feel, and that brings out the Kleenex. As soon as the Hallmark commercials used to come on, my kids would start sneaking peeks at me to see if I was crying yet.)
- Appreciative listening allows that there might be something to be gained in the listening. It's standing on Martin Buber's narrow ridge, with your own opinions and understandings, but open, nonetheless, to the possibility of change.
- This is the kind of listening that is a crucial skill for deep dialogue. It lets ideas *into* your mind, not just in one ear and out the other while you are preparing what you want to say in return.

Good communication skills, appreciative and forgiving ears, and time to spend together, are how we get to know each other. Social hour after the service, in our small groups, at

book discussion groups, movie clubs, social suppers, even committee meetings – these are all opportunities for deepening, and strengthening, our relationships. We had a very meaningful and productive Board of Trustees retreat yesterday at which a lot of good and creative communication happened. There is always more to know about another person, and you never know when they might decide they trust you enough to tell you something kept private until that moment. It's nice to realize when you are being given such a gift. What you end up hearing depends, at least in part, on what you're listening for.

I have a Social Hour suggestion for all of us. Find someone with whom you are not well acquainted, or don't know at all, and introduce yourselves. Share something about yourselves with each other, and laugh together if you feel awkward, because, after all, the minister made you do it. Who knows, you might be making a new friend.

The most important gift we can give each other is our time and our attention, in other words, ourselves.

May it be so.