

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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“We are One”

Homily

At the worship service this past Easter Sunday we invited families with children to sit in the first two rows of pews. The children processed into the church from the back of the sanctuary at the beginning of the service and found their places. Some children, rather than search for their parents, simply sat on the floor.

As the activity quieted down, our own church historian, Peter Thoms, wearing a suit, came to the pulpit and announced that he had something special to share. Silence, anticipation and curiosity ensued.

He had received some documentation recounting the 19th century practice of renting pew space and other interesting information about our church. As he spoke, Mara, Catherine and I noticed something slightly surprising and wholly delightful. The children in the front row, including some of our most energetic boys on the floor, had their wide eyes fixed on Peter—interest and rapt attention showing in their faces.

In that moment, I experienced a feeling of cosmic wholeness--the kind of oneness that so many mystics across time and spiritual traditions have attempted to convey. Indeed, the feeling that is the goal of so many spiritual practices. It is the sense that everything and everyone is One--the reconciling of the apparent dualisms of diversity versus interrelatedness and individuality versus interconnectedness--the sense that there are no dualisms—that individuality and profound oneness exist at the same time—that even the boundaries between past, present and future are not solid.

Many of us, I am sure, experience such moments at some points in our lives no matter what spiritual practices we engage in. Some members of our human family devote their lives to continually sustaining this paradigm. Yet for many of us, these moments are fleeting—slipping away like the last sliver of sunlight at dusk.

I later reflected on the significance of my feeling of cosmic oneness. This had occurred, not surprisingly, within communal sacred space in the midst of communal ritual. And here, in that moment were several generations together. Here was an illustration of our church community. And here were sketches of our church's past, present and future showing themselves at the same time. Peter Thoms, a current church member telling us about a piece of our distant history, with the possible purveyors of our church's future listening (with interest!).

I realized that while we may all state different reasons for coming to worship services and participating in church life, once we get here—once we engage—we become a part of an interconnected web—a whole unit—whether we are experiencing it that way or not.

When I studied prehistoric cultures and religions at the graduate level, I became opened to the way our ancestors continually lived within this paradigm of wholeness—continually living within the context of multigenerational community and in harmony with the cycles and spirits of the natural world. These ancestors apparently did not live with a concept of linear time, nor was religion separated from daily life or body from spirit.

I imagine that it might have been much easier then for everyone to maintain this sense of interrelatedness. Indeed, there is evidence in what we know about Native American spiritualities, for example, that people did.

Our modern Western lives, however, are highly compartmentalized. Our personal lives are divided into career/family. We now reside within nuclear families (if we're lucky) rather than tribal groups. Our communal lives are separated into more units: government, health care, education and, yes, religion, to name a few. And within those units there is even more dichotomy. Hospitals are divided into cardiac units, emergency rooms, urology...Schools divide life up into different subjects and divide children up into age groups. And we inevitably recreate those patterns in our church lives.

Yet, I wonder if this is what we really want. Is it possible to truly be a spiritual community, as we proclaim at the beginning of every worship service, and remain divided amongst ourselves most of the time into separate age groups and departments? Is it possible to be a spiritual community if the individual's primary goal is getting their own needs met? What **is** spiritual community?

I have recently been drawn to the personal path of discovering the truth about my Native American roots. I have become painfully aware that my mother's prevalent Mohawk lineage had been denied as the result of external racism and internalized oppression and shame. The result has been, not only that the knowledge of my genetic makeup was hidden from me until adulthood, but that my relations and I, for the past five generations have been separated from tribal life—a larger community of origin that continues to

struggle to maintain it's identity and cohesiveness in the face of pressure to assimilate into divided society.

And many others among us, though their genetic heritage may not have been hidden in a cloak of shame, are also separated from their tribes of origin. Thus we gather in a town, in a neighborhood, in a church. Perhaps we are all seeking a tribe. But perhaps we have forgotten how to be a tribe.

Last weekend I attended the Abenaki Pow-Wow in Swanton, Vermont. The Abenaki are the indigenous people of Vermont. While at the gathering that was meant to celebrate Abenaki heritage (and existence), I was both moved and soothed by the drumming and native singing in which all generations of the community participated in. Several people circled around one large drum that they played at the same time, often in different beats.

I realized that for these people, the drum is something that holds the community together. It was and is, the heartbeat of the cohesive, Whole community.

That led me to wonder what it is that holds this community together—the Unitarian Church of Montpelier. What is our heartbeat? What makes us Whole?

We are not bound together by blood lines, but we do have all the elements of a Whole community—a tribe, if you will. This was evident on Easter morning in the sanctuary. It is evident when all ages of children and adults circle together on the green rug each Sunday morning.

Like tribal people of the past and present, we have here a shared history, a common set of values, people that care about one another and a central organization. We have individuals of every age and stage of life who gather here--who matter--who are a part of the whole.

Is it our goal to emulate Cosmic Unity—to break down the boundaries of our separate desires and generations and beat the same drum? How do we live in that Oneness? What does that look like?

I believe I got a glimpse of what it looks and feels like last Easter morning, and I see this as one of the main reasons I do what I do here. I believe we can honor and celebrate differences while beating a communal (if metaphorical) drum. We can experience and maintain Holy Oneness. We have to do it with conscious intention, but I believe we can move more deeply into that place if we so choose. We can reclaim a modernly elusive aspect of human heritage that has the potential of moving and soothing each and every one of us.

May It Be So.

