

All Our Children

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Reading By Rev. Frank Hall

I drove with my family to Marblehead Neck, so named because it sticks its neck out into the cold Massachusetts Bay on the North Shore of Boston. The town is comprised of a rocky peninsula that extends into the cold Atlantic.

On that September afternoon we went to watch huge waves we heard were crashing onto the rocks following a big storm. It was a warm, clear day, and I've never seen such huge waves crashing onto sea rocks where I'd spent many pleasant hours sitting by a calmer sea, reading or just relaxing – I went to college in nearby Salem.

I had my son Jonathan, who was four years old, on my shoulders and Anita was holding Susan's hand – Sue was eight.

We were in a high, safe spot, but two twelve or fourteen-year old boys were in a precarious position on lower rocks close to the shore where the waves were crashing highest. They were being bold. They dressed in bright yellow slickers and they were laughing and challenging one another to get closer.

Then it happened: a massive wave came crashing onto their rocks. One of the boys managed to cling to the rock and as soon as the wave subsided he scampered down and onto the shore; his companion wasn't so fortunate. He was washed into that roiling sea, pulled out by the receding wave.

I took Jonathan from my shoulders and went running down from our safe-rock perch. I kicked off my shoes and was ready to dive in to save the boy when another huge wave rose twenty feet and came rolling after me, and I retreated.

Bold is one thing, irresponsibly brazen is another.

I scampered bare foot up the rocks where the two boys had been and just when I arrived a wave hit and I held on for dear life. Then a strange thing happened – someone standing on shore, in the backyard of a house that was being hit by the biggest waves yelled over to me—there was a chasm between us—I couldn't hear his words but I caught the green garden hose he threw to me.

I stood alone holding the hose for a second or two wondering why in the world he would throw a garden hose to me when it was clear that I had scampered onto those rocks to try to save the boy from certain drowning. We caught glimpses of the bright yellow slicker bobbing under and surfacing as the waves swelled up and down.

Before I realized why someone had thrown a green garden hose another guy climbed up to where I was standing, took the hose out of my bewildered anxious hands and wrapped one end of it around his waist, tying it as tight as you can tie a garden hose. Then he handed the other end to me, and, of course, by then I realized why someone had thrown a garden hose to me.

My partner yelled instructions, he was clearly in charge: "We'll get as close as we can..." I knew what we were about to do, or *attempt* to do, though I wasn't as confident as my partner seemed to be.

A wave came as we stood on the exposed end of those rocks, but luckily it wasn't one of those big killer waves. We clung to one another as well as whatever hold we could get on raged rocks. Our faces were inches away from one another and he looked into my eyes – it was a once-in-a-lifetime look, clearly conveying all he wanted to say. Then he yelled, "Hang on," and he dove in.

Within seconds he grabbed the boy's yellow slicker that was serving as a kind of life raft with trapped air. I pulled them in and together we dragged the limp, seemingly lifeless body higher onto the rocks; we rolled him over and we pushed or maybe whacked him from behind...nothing...and again, and I pulled some seaweed from his mouth and he choked a breath and threw up a bellyful of ocean, and gasped air back and began to breathe.

Almost as soon as he began to breathe a fire truck arrived—where did that come from, I wondered—and firemen used a short ladder to form a bridge and they came and took over.

In a minute the boy was gone, and my partner shook my hand hard and said, simply, “Nice going!” I said, “Thanks...” and meant to say more. I wanted to say, “Thanks for putting your trust in me; thanks for having the courage to jump into that roiling sea.”

But before I had a chance to say anything he was gone—we never had any conversation. The people invited me into their house to wash my bloodied feet – I hadn't noticed the cuts.

Someone had retrieved my shoes and given them to my family, who were even more shaken up than I was.

This is a story about being bold by doing what needed to be done. It is a story about needing one another: we needed the hose and someone threw it; we needed one of us on each end of that lifeline. We needed one another. Certainly the unconscious boy floating on the raging ocean needed us.

There's a brief powerful footnote to this incident. A similar incident took place on Marblehead Neck that same afternoon, a few hundred yards away. A boy was pulled into the raging sea and a young man, a champion swimmer, dove in to save him. The would-be rescuer never surfaced. The boy who had been pulled in was tossed onto the rocks and rescued.

“We need one another when we would accomplish some great task and cannot do it alone.”

After being encouraged by many of you, Zac, my 6 year old and I spent a week at Star Island this year. For those who don't know, Star Island is off the coast of New Hampshire about an hour into the Atlantic Ocean. It's a tiny, beautiful island founded in the early 20th century as a Unitarian and Congregationalist conference center, now shared by the UUs and United Church of Christ. The buildings are from the turn of the last century which feels appropriate in the cell-free, car-free, virtually screen-free environment. The heart of the island is a massive front porch built connecting several buildings, facing the ocean and lined with lounge chairs. The week we went was during a religious education conference. I was offered a free week for myself and my family. My husband couldn't come so I looked for a week there would be a lot of children.

We arrived two days after the start of the conference, so when we got there most people had found their rhythm and nearly everyone knew people either because so many were religious educator colleagues or because they attend this conference annually. Zac and I were outsiders but I assumed Zac would find his way quickly since Julie Rigano, a member of this congregation, was the teacher for young children's programming each morning, a very lucky and happy coincidence for us.

We arrived in the afternoon. Meals at Star are served family style at tables of a dozen or so. For that first dinner, I did what any Westchester mom would do. I sat my kid next to me, made sure he had his napkin on his lap and did his best to be polite and friendly while not disturbing the other guests. The next morning I walked him to his activity room after worship and told him not to leave there until I pick him up. After lunch, he played at the playground while I sat on a bench and watched him.

But something shifted over the course of the next day. Some of the other visitors started demonstrating a different way to parent on the island and it didn't take long before I got the hang of it. It started with breakfast when a kid came looking for Zac. Without another seat at our table, the kid's mother offered to look after him at her table. Off he went. It snowballed from there, leading to a pattern of parenting that, in NY would have been

fodder for eye rolling at the very least.

What emerged as the norm was something of a co-parenting situation. There was a lot of, “I’m taking mine to see the caves if you’d like me to take yours too” and even a bunch of “Have you seen my kid?” which always got a nod and point in the right direction. I heard a girl ask her father for ice cream when a stranger called out, “All she ate for lunch was bread.” And, I even got one, “Do you know where my wife went” to which I explained that she needed to meet someone and would be back in an hour.”

In other words, there were a lot of eyes out all the time, lots of people paying attention and a warm sense that we were all in this together. It’s a small island with nowhere to go and not much to do and everyone has committed themselves to being there for the week. It’s a choice we made and we were all in.

That kind of human interaction, of partnership and comfort level isn’t easy to find. I grew up in an apartment building in Yonkers that had some of that, or it did from my perspective as a little girl. When my family moved to Larchmont, that experience wasn’t duplicated. I certainly don’t have it now although I can feel the desire from some other parents to work more like a group than a bunch of individuals who happen to be in the same place.

Not only about parenting, life in 21st century New York – and many other places – can be quite isolating. We have an unspoken expectation that casual conversation doesn’t pass the “I’m fine and you” stage, even when the discussion lasts a long time or is about something difficult. You lost your job and someone asks about it. You’d like to tell them that you’re broke and frightened and feeling worse about yourself than you ever have, but instead you say there are some bright prospects and in the meantime you’re getting a lot of projects done you haven’t had time for in years. The conversation might go on for half an hour but you leave it feeling more alone than when it started.

In this world of fragmentation and disconnection, congregational life has always been my beacon of hope. Theoretically, here at First Unitarian we are more than 200 people who are committed to living differently, to living honestly, creating a culture of authentic inclusion. Or maybe we are 150 adults who are reaching for this vision and another 60 children for whom we’re trying to normalize this new world.

Some of what we try to create here is a place people can be and can bring their whole selves. Many of you have come here after a death or divorce or in some other kind of crisis and arrive just needing a place to be safe. As I’ve said before, the top two reasons people join a congregation is to educate their children or because they’re in crisis, and sometimes these things are related. Our unspoken agreement is that we will provide space for either of these or so many more. Social isolation, a need for a spiritual home, a secret desire to live boldly or experience transformation or a break from the averageness of daily life are also reasons people join. And most people will admit that, regardless of why they first arrived, they stay because of the deep need for community, especially a community grounded in shared values.

And what we have here is a “freely chosen and life sustaining interdependence.”¹ Unitarian Universalism is a covenanted faith. We don’t agree to believe the same thing but we do agree to seek the ways of love, together. We agree to be with and for one another, to partner with each other on all the paths of a long and full life.

This has been who we are since our founding. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to be the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy band of Puritans sailing with high and pious hopes toward a new life in the New World. He said:

“Now the only way to avoid...shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of others’ necessities...We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”²

Regardless of the reputation the Puritans have gained over time, the truth is they weren’t half as interested in a unity of belief as a unity of mission, a shared decision to live in love together. The decision to live in mutual

¹ Quotes come directly from the Minns Lecture of 2000 by Alice Blair Wesley. Many of the ideas I have come from this lecture as well. The foundation of my understanding of covenant was outlined by Rev. Wesley in her fifth lecture which can be found here: <http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/Lecture5.pdf>

² <http://www.john-uebersax.com/pdf/John%20Winthrop%20-%20Model%20of%20Christian%20Charity%20v1.01.pdf>. 9-12-2016.

love is what bound them each for the other and it is what they chose to record as the foundation for their new church and new society.

In their founding document – and, therefore our founding document - The Cambridge Platform of 1648, they tell us we are a “covenanted free church, a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise, a covenant: We pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate, our religious loyalty. So, we shall meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we will yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together.”³

While these are our cultural forebears, what has become the American norm, is very different. We live in a consumer culture. It’s not about working together or learning the ways of love together, but about making sure we get what we paid for. I admit, our congregation is not immune to this. While it still surprises me, I have certainly been confronted, as has most of our leadership with those kinds of expectations. From time to time a member will threaten to leave if they don’t get something they want. This can be as small as anger over keys being changed or as large as whether or not we pay our full dues to the UUA. It happens several times a year that someone tells me or a member of our board – or even more sadly, writes a letter or an email – declaring their impending departure or cut in pledge due to a dissatisfaction generally with the expectation that we will fix whatever it is they don’t like.

In our consumer culture, this makes sense. I don’t like the way the town pool is run, I don’t renew my membership. I don’t like the service at a restaurant, I don’t eat there. That’s how these places know to shape up. It’s the American, capitalist way.

But, congregational life is here to be counter-cultural, to offer an alternative to the norm. We don’t charge people for a service we guarantee. We are a covenanted community, committed to finding and living in the ways of love. We are, in times of crisis, the ones who will tie a hose around our wastes to pull you out of the crashing waves before you drown. We are the ones who will welcome you to the pot luck even when you didn’t bring food, and will educate your children with the values you espouse. We will celebrate and mourn and dream a new world together.

We are here to follow a spiritual path of interdependence. Sometimes my colleagues joke that seminary should have had a course in customer service. But, Unitarian Universalists aren’t customers, we are congregants, we are equal members of a community struggling to find or learn or live the ways of love.

A spirituality of interdependence is a beautiful and challenging concept. Spirituality is the way we seek greater life, the way we seek meaning. Religion is how we do that in community. So when I talk about a spiritual path, I’m referring to the path into deeper, more meaningful life.

I think I had a window into spiritual interdependence on Star Island. One morning a handful of parents, including myself, got into row boats and rowed the kids to a nearby island. We got them out of the boats and onto the island where we explored for a while and then back in the boats and to home we went. The parents of those children were practicing interdependence as they let their children go off in the boats with us. After lunch my 6 year old went running off with his new best friend. Several hours later I decided to take a walk to see if I could find him in one of the places he had permission to investigate. I found him with another parent in the Marine Lab with a snake wrapped around his arm. He was at a table coloring, as if a snake hadn’t slide up his body and wrapped around him so comfortably. I took a quick step back when I noticed it and another mom put her hand on my back and assured me both the snake and boy were safe and happy. I told her snakes weren’t my thing so I’d be going back to the porch to read for a bit. She thought that was a good idea. Walking away is a spiritual practice. Letting to. Allowing the web of care to protect my son.

Outside of unusual experiences like summer vacation on a tiny island, webs of interdependence take time to weave. It begins with trust, with risk taking. It continues with mutuality and promise making. It’s enlarged with practice and intentionality. You know those webs exist when your home floods and you call your community for help. Actually calling and asking for help or accepting help when offered is what we do when we are in authentic relationship. It is what we avoid when we are not. As Winthrop said “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together.”

I wonder if we can practice this. Like many of you, I’m genuinely concerned for the future of our nation

³ <http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/Lecture5.pdf>

as we institutionalize hate at the highest levels of government. Next week I'll address that more directly, but with that in mind and in the context of our covenanted faith, I am hoping we can practice the ways of love together. I am hoping we can become intentional about a spirituality of interdependence.

This practice will be directed toward each other and the way we welcome everyone in our community and the way we understand our own place as members. My hope is that we will take our strong foundation and build an even more resilient community of love. Letting go of consumerism, I ask us all to approach dissatisfaction with these questions in mind. 1) Rather than placing blame, is there a way for me to become part of a solution? 2) Rather than assuming poor intentions, can I engage curiosity and learn more about what's happening. 3) Rather than disengaging, can I use love and an open heart to move through this experience?

What would that look like in real time? I suppose it depends on what bugs you. There are too many announcements on Sunday morning. A child is being too fidgety during worship. There's a typo in the program. You don't want to hear any more sermons with a justice theme.

First step is breathing deeply. Second isn't pulling back but pushing in. If we are learning the ways of love together, we aren't stepping away but leaning in. Nothing is someone else's problem. It's all our problems. We are delighting, mourning, laboring and suffering together. A child is too fidgety? Shift your seat. Enjoy the noise in gratitude for new life. Offer to help the parent. Campaign for child care funding. This isn't about sitting on the outside but about knowing we are in this together.

I think our greatest hope in this country in light of so much hate is a dramatic increase of communities of love. If we are going to offer respite for people being tossed about in this complicated and problematic climate, we need to shift our own mindset, weaving ourselves into an interdependent web. We need to commit ourselves to being with and for each other, for keeping an eye on each other's children and holding on to the other end of the hose to save someone from drowning. Our gift is our covenant. It's our decision to be with one another in all that life brings. We have, right here in this room, all we need to weather the storms ahead. If things go poorly, we might become a beacon of hope for many others doing their best not to be tossed by waves of hate. Together, let's weave a safety web of interdependence, protecting each other, being with and for each other, holding tight to our children, delighting and mourning and laboring, together as one body, deeply connected, committed and covenanted with one another.