

# **In Need of Constant Tuning**

*A sermon by William McEvoy*

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I play the banjo. Now, if you ask anyone who's ever heard me play the banjo, they'll dispute that. And they may have a point. And then there's a whole cadre of people who will tell you that the banjo isn't really a musical instrument, but like the accordion or the bagpipes, an instrument of destruction. And they may have a point.

But the thing is, I play the banjo. And if you play the banjo, or heaven help you, someone you love plays the banjo, you know that it is in need of constant tuning. You can spend a lot of time tuning the instrument. One needs to change the tuning on the strings to play different songs, and banjos are notorious for falling out of tune quickly, I swear if I look at my banjo crosswise, the D drops to a C. And tuning can be tedious, if you're like me and you can't tune by ear, you watch the needle on the tuner just miss the right tuning. Then you jiggle the tuning pegs a little, and try again. But once that banjo is in tune, once that open G tuning is just right I can play Cripple Creek, okay, I can't play Cripple Creek but the point is, I can play. And I enjoy playing. So after a few minutes of dull, tedious tuning, I get to play. And if I happen to play well, other people can enjoy my playing as well. Maybe even sing along.

But there's something about tuning, and this is true for any instrument that needs to be tuned. It needs a particular balance, a particular tension between too tight and too slack. If you tune a string too slack, you often get a dull, flat sound, ugly to the ear. If you tune it too tight, you get a sharp sound, also ugly to the ear, but you also run the risk of snapping the string, of breaking it, and then you can't play at all. So the key to good tuning is a gentle touch, a good ear, or rather an attentive ear, and patience. To tune well, you need to practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. Mindfulness can be developed in many ways, but the most prevalent is mindfulness meditation -- those self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness. It can be very effective and helpful. Being aware of our emotions, our actions on a moment-to-moment basis can be very powerful – some of the empirically supported benefits of mindfulness include better focus, reduced stress and a better working memory. A lot of the attention, particularly in terms of the press and the books you might buy at the bookstore is on the individual, on self-improvement. What I want to talk about today is applying that practice outside ourselves, to how we are mindful of our relationships with each other.

So if I may, I'm going to ask for a volunteer here to hold the other end of this piece of yarn. (sets that up). So we've got this piece of yarn between us. We have a little flexibility here a little give – this yarn is a little more forgiving than say, a banjo string. And while both of us pay attention to the tension, we can keep things pretty well tuned – if I slacken a little, he can pick up the slack, or maybe give a little tug just to remind me to pay attention. Things may get a little stressed, a little angry, and the tension increases, but the yarn doesn't break, and eventually, we get back to equilibrium. Now that's fine as far as it goes, (take back the yarn) but we don't have the luxury of just having one relationship to balance. Imagine a similar string going out to Peggy. Now I've got two relationships to keep tuned, and if Peggy also has one to \_\_\_\_\_ . And that may be tough enough, but let's say we all have another string out to Diane. That's a lot to keep tuned, that's a lot to keep balanced. And none of us, especially none of us here in this room today, in this intentional community, have that simple a relationship system. Most of us have a complex set of relationships that we're constantly involved with, even the most curmudgeonly, hermetic one among us probably has at

least a dozen. And if we visualize this as strings between us, strings in tension, we begin to see a web. Imagine each web centered on an individual reaching out to others. And we begin to see how one part of the web can affect another part all the way on the other side.

Now I can't tell you whether it's inherent in our DNA or learned, but humans are social animals, we make these connections, and we learn from the cradle how maintain that tension. A baby cries, a parent responds, and we know that there can be no small amount of psychological damage if there is consistently no response, if there is no connection. We know that when these webs in a family setting are not well attended, all the members of the family are impacted, and we get dysfunction. Even when there isn't dysfunction, this relationship web plays an important role in the development of the person, and in the development of the family unit.

By and large, I think this tuning is automatic. I think we've learned . . . on a sometimes unconscious level how to do this tuning, but sometimes, we need more conscious effort. We need to take a friend out to dinner. We need to sit with our parents or our partner or our children and have a talk about the relationship. We recognize that at times our unconscious tuning has to be acted on with mindfulness. We recognize that our implicit agreements sometimes need to be made explicit.

But why do all this tuning? Why spend all this time and attention on maintaining the proper tension in our relationships? To what end? Well, for the same reason I tune my banjo. To play. Sometimes I mean that literally, to play, to laugh, to enjoy the time I spend with the people I have relationships with. Very often, it isn't the activity itself that gives us joy, but sharing that activity with people we are in tune with, with whom the relationship is right. Think of your most enjoyable pastime, one that isn't solitary. Now imagine doing it with someone you have a sour relationship with. Ruins the fun, doesn't it? Imagine doing the same thing with two

people with whom you have a good relationship with, but are having troubles among them.  
Yuck.

Now think about your most dreaded chore. Imagine doing it together with a loved one, someone you're in tune with, laughing, joking, striving together. It's much easier, isn't it? And doing it with a group of friends? It's a party! (By the way, my house needs painting next spring so. . .) So keeping these relationships in tune improves the quality of our lives, the quality of our experiences. The quality of our play.

Now, often when I use the word play, it's as a synonym for creation. It isn't necessarily a formal game. If you think about creating, it's really play. To my ear, the phrase "creative work", is an oxymoron. When we create, be it something like poetry or sculpture, we play – we move around notes, or words or stone and we create. And creation isn't just for "artists" – you'll sometimes hear mathematicians or physicists talk about how they play with numbers or formulas. I have a friend who's an actuary, the guy who figures out risk for insurance companies, which to many people's minds has got to be one of the dullest jobs on the planet – but when he talks about his work, dealing with risk factors and payout amounts, you can see his enthusiasm, his sense of play about the numbers.

Another element to play and creation that I find necessary is that it's not a solo pursuit. It needs to engage others for a thing to be truly creative. Even observing counts as engagement. Ask any actor and they'll tell you that they read their audience every night, and give a different performance based on the feel of the room. Think about the World Series that just ended. Would it have been nearly as exciting, would the drama of it all be nearly as compelling if the stadium were empty? I'm going to get all Heisenberg quantum physics-ey here, but a tree that

falls in the wood may make sound if no one hears it, but if no one hears it, it doesn't make music. It needs an observer.

We're playing and creating right now. I did a sermon last week for my class, a totally different subject, and for the assignment, I did it in my home in front of a video camera. On paper I guess it was okay, but I wouldn't call it a creative process. But here, today, I'm throwing these thoughts out to you, you're taking them in, thinking about them, reacting, maybe you hate it, it doesn't really matter, it's this interaction, between me and you, this play of ideas, that is creation.

This playing happens better if we're in tune. Now I'm new here, and you're gracefully giving me the benefit of the doubt, but as our relationship continues, we'll need to both be responsible for keeping it in tune, for making sure the string of our connection gets neither too strong nor too slack. So, as Mr. Shakespeare said, "The play is the thing."

Now let's turn to us, to you all. Here we are, sitting together in an intentional community that we call the First Unitarian Society of Westchester. Nobody is forced to be here, nobody's forced to think a particular way. Many of us have signed the book, an act of creation by the way, which symbolized that we agreed to join this community and enter into the web of relationships that represented. Let's think about the enormity of that, we have decided to give a part of our life to this community, we've given up many of our Sundays as well as other times of the week to keep this community together and functioning, and this has been going on, generation after generation, for a hundred and fifty years.

As I pointed out earlier, it is a complex set of relationships, a complex web that's involved here.

Nearly all of us came as strangers to this community, and have over time, found our place in the web, or even have shifted our spot. Some of us are new, like me, and we're still poking around, developing those connections, that tension between us. All that poking and shifting affects the tension on the web, and those tensions affect everyone connected to it, to some degree or another. If the relationship gets slack, we find ourselves in a rut, if too tight, we find ourselves arguing.

So how do we, as a congregation, keep things tuned? Well for starters, we have a professional staff that's been trained to help keep things in tune. We talk to each other, we are in relationship with each other, and we bring to bear all those unconscious and learned methods we have for tuning our relationships. Sometimes, we recognize the need for a more explicit tuning – one manifestation of that has been the Listening Conversations we've been having over the past month.

Another tool we have in our possession is our covenant. Now I've done a lot of work on covenants. I understand that last year we worked on a written covenant and that fell by the wayside, and that happens, often in a first attempt. But whether it's written down or not, make no mistake, we have a covenant. A lot of congregations don't have a written covenant. Some depend on a brief affirmational covenant like the James Vila Blake piece we read earlier. These congregations get by just fine until, well. You see, the problem with unspoken or vague covenants comes up when there is a disagreement among members about just what is in that covenant. Are you obliged to resolve issues with another member directly and avoid triangulation? Have you agreed to give both time and treasure to the community? Did you agree not to gossip? This is not covered by the Blake affirmation, "to dwell together in peace" is subject to broad interpretation. And a completely unspoken one doesn't speak to any of this.

And that's when the problems start.

Another point about implicit covenants is that they are unwelcoming to outsiders. Someone joins the community or hopes to, they have to figure out for themselves and eventually define for themselves what the covenant is. That's a lot of work for a newcomer, it is certainly not radical hospitality.

Now I will be the first to tell you that an explicit covenant is a tool, and a tool that can be sorely misused. Treated as a legalistic document, it can be used as a weapon against the contrarian, against the minority opinion, like any tool it can be abused. But if treated as an aspirational document, it becomes a useful tool, I would say it's like this tuner – it lets us know if we're right on the D or not. It helps us, this complex web of relationships that we have all voluntarily joined, stay in tune. So I hope we'll revisit it at some point, even if the thing never gets written down, talking about it, talking about what our vision of our covenantal community is, of what our covenant is, that in itself helps us to keep in tune.

And a UU congregation has some important creation, some important play, dare I say, some important work to do. We are a light of liberal religion in a darkness of consumerism and me-firstism and fundamentalism and any other -ism you want to add. We work for change in a world that prefers not to change, we take social action that changes people's lives, whether it be marching in a protest, lobbying our elected officials, or feeding and clothing the homeless and destitute. We are here to help create a better world, we are here to play – and the better in tune we are, the more people will sing along.

 **creative commons** William McEvoy, 2017

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