

Connecting

A little over a year ago, Lois, my only sister, 13 years older, died after a short, sharp series of strokes. Lois wasn't supposed to die, her husband told me; she was the healthier one. But she did. I had not seen her in several years, Covid you know, but despite her living in Denver we were pretty well connected to each other my whole life.

When I was young, she would take me places and read magazines with me. I don't recall what I made of Mademoiselle and Vogue when I was four, sitting on her lap and turning the pages. She explained things to me, like why the movie theater had a double feature Christmas Special but Santa Claus didn't come to it. When I was five and she was home from college, she asked me to sleep in her bed at night and I recall that it was soft and warm under the covers while the bitterly cold Nebraska winter winds howled outside. At her wedding, days after her college graduation, I felt numb, a little boy ghost forgotten by the busy, noisy adults until someone asked me if I wanted to hug my sister goodbye and I ran into her arms, crying. The white lace on her dress felt scratchy.

Over the years, we visited sometimes and she wrote me letters from Colorado that didn't bother with commas and periods, letters that were "stream of UN-consciousness" in jumping from subject to subject and running sentences ten lines long. I saved some of them because they were such very expressive poetry. Over the phone and during visits, we laughed a lot and made jokes and we told each other secrets, fears, shame, irritations and triumphs.

So it was a gut-punch when I got a call from Lois's daughter, Dawn, saying she'd had a stroke and they didn't know what would happen. I talked to my niece nearly every day and—because sometimes people in a coma can hear something said to them—I told Dawn to tell my only sister that she was my favorite sister and she seemed to smile a little. I'm proud of how that affirmed our connection.

We are all friends and members here, in part, because human connection is very important. We bring with us the models of connection we learned over time and try to relate to each other along those lines. Those connections don't die with

the people but continue to guide us. Because our member Bill Reynolds's sister died just weeks before his planned wedding, he and I discussed the propriety of going ahead with the ceremony. When I asked him if she were able to tell us, what would she recommend, he thought that her open-hearted, generous manner would lead her to say go ahead, and so we did. The way we connect lives on beyond us.

In June, when I spoke to you, I reflected on how the pandemic disconnected us pretty badly. I decided to pull the connection closer by calling every member and friend of the congregation. I made calls during June and July in an effort to hear how everyone was doing, if they feel that FUSW is giving them what they need, and where—in the broadest sense, not just geographically—they think FUSW should go in the future. I also put a notice in the Scoop for those who missed my call or those I missed. I wanted to hear from each one of you and then followed up with more dialogue. (I also encouraged people to attend Zoom groups for the Future Committee as another chance to remind everyone to participate in giving their opinions about the direction we should take.)

I planned this because I was feeling lonesome and disconnected myself. I didn't have a feel for what you were thinking and feeling. During Covid times, the casual conversations that I might have had before and after services could not occur. Zoom did not facilitate "reading the room", i.e., sensing the mood, during services. That left most of us in emotional ignorance of each other. The lifeblood of our congregation is personal connectedness on both an emotional and intellectual basis. From that foundation we will work together to worship, extend our reach to others, and engage in social action. Phone calls are an imperfect substitute for in-person contact, and I don't know of any minister who tried calling every member and friend, but unconventional times call for unconventional responses.

Yes, I know I talk about connectedness a lot, but maybe you can tolerate a little more of it. My subject today is not particularly the content of what many of you said, but the underlying themes informing what you said. Going forward we will consider many options for where we worship and meet, how we organize

ourselves, and how we express ourselves. How we reason about those options matters greatly.

The reason most of you connected here is that you were dissatisfied with your religious community of childhood. Some felt personally demeaned by childhood congregations because part of your identity was rejected. Some married a person of another faith and needed an accepting hybrid congregation. Others hit a theological disagreement. Usually, there is some combination of factors promoting disconnection with previous faiths. A small minority are here because you were raised Unitarian Universalist and you chose our particular community. Ninety percent of you disconnected from other religions in order to consciously, deliberately, connect here.

HERE ARE SOME OF THEMES IN OUR CONNECTION

1) Religious Education: The old model we used for growth was to offer parents moral education for their children that respects but does not repeat their parents' backgrounds. A lot of people suggested solutions to revitalize religious education and offered to do them! I was pleasantly surprised that some people are deeply committed to addressing religious education. There are people here with energy for helping children accept and appreciate the wisdom of other faiths, make ethical decisions, understand their own and others' sexualities, and interact sensitively with each other.

2) Adult Spirituality: Generally, we are not a mystical people. Our focus in worship is not on getting in tune with some transcendent, seemingly external reality such as God or Being Itself; nobody told me they want prayer as part of Sunday services. Many people talked about compassion and community; many strongly feel a need for in-person services so they emotionally connect with others and feel included. The yearning to speak and hear in community was extremely evident. I gleaned from my conversations that, like the Quakers, spirituality speaks to us from inner resources. Access, by our very nature, to the transcendent realities of life informed a huge commitment to hearing the wisdom of all participants, with program groups being a favorite vehicle for organizing worship. Therefore, when the pulpit is shared so each may witness to the wisdom

of all participants, we are enriched more than if we restricted the pulpit to one designated person. We are enriched by discussing freely with each other because different viewpoints help us refine our opinions.

3) *Where to Worship*: Speaking of different opinions, there was immense variety in terms of the physical settings people thought we should seek. The range of settings people could find congenial was very wide. Everyone was willing to make different compromises between cost, estimates of future growth possibilities, mass transit access, social context, and aesthetics. We are going to need a lot of patience with the democratic method to peacefully decide.

4) *The Search for Truth and Meaning*: Several people spoke fervently about their commitment to freely search for truth as the primary reason they attend FUSW. That search for truth is dialectical, in that I may have a particular truth that I find convincing: informed by intuition, some research I have read, and my reasoning from experience and logic. You may draw on different resources or reason from a different perspective and come to a different conclusion. If we share not only our truths but the information that informs those truths, we may arrive at a synthesis that we find helpful. We recognize that people have the divine lodged internally, known as “incarnational theology,” meaning that which is divine is made in flesh. Like the Quakers, we believe that everyone has a piece of the divine, which gives everyone access to the essential, spiritual realities of life.

5) *Values and Meaning*: The search for meaning is more diffuse than the search for truth, because what gives your life meaning may differ, due to subcultural differences, different genetic makeups, and different experiences in life. But here we are really talking about the paradigms we bring to our lives in the search for fulfillment. Meaning makes life worthwhile. Two essential components of values clarification—repeatedly and publicly affirming a value—are thus facilitated here.

6) *Our Legacy*: Many people referenced that we are an aging congregation, which partly seemed to feed the strong commitment to religious education I mentioned before and partly leads to trying to understand the unprecedented era

in which we find ourselves. We are more vigorous at an age far beyond when we thought it would be possible. We need others' wisdom about this elder vitality—what do we do with it. Despite aging, or perhaps because aging increases the urgency for social change, several people are deeply committed to social action, and regularly witness to justice. As Joshua Liebman put it:

Religion can teach us . . . how to understand the goal of life in the presence of mortality. . . . we should create a pattern that will be a blessing and inspiration to those who come after us. When we die, those who have been touched and illumined by the flame of our being should think of us with joyous reminiscence. . . . no one shall cry in frustration or anger when we have gone, that no one shall silently curse the day of our birth, but rather they shall recall our days upon earth in the concert hall of memory and shall laugh with overbrimming joy that a dear one walked the earth bravely and lovingly. (Joshua Loth Liebman)

We recognize that life is insecure but we have the hard and glorious task of deepening it and enriching it. The impelling voice in us that calls us to be considerate in conduct and generous in speech may be called divine. That divine voice calls us to struggle lovingly against oppressive brute power with Truth, a struggle that we feel deeply and energetically act on. When our spiritual struggle flowers into social activism we are creating beauty in the place of ugliness and laughter in the place of tears.

In one year, we have accomplished a great deal to preserve this congregation. Going forward, great urgency and high stakes may lead any of us to state our opinions forcefully. Our connections with each other are about witnessing to a truth AND lovingly respecting each other's personhood. We are connected here because we wish to be stronger and more loving. We can be considerate of each other as a model for the world to emulate. We will reconstruct our religious education, pursue adult spirituality, worship in a new place and in new ways, search for Truth and Meaning, and affirm a vibrant legacy. We will do all that with energy, anxiety, hope, irritation, and sadness, to mention a few. We will do it anyway, because that is who we are. We have persistence,

courage, and curiosity that fuels our delving into ourselves as we explore a world that is ever-changing.