

Scheuneman Program Group Service Feb 4, 2024

Susan Greenberg

The program group process of **determining a topic** for a Sunday Service is fascinating and always different! This time around, ten of us were squares on zoom when Marilee asked if anyone had an idea.

The idea came from one of us having a thought from an article in **AARP magazine**, and another one of us having **similar thoughts** from an article in the Columbia University Alumni Magazine.

In an interview with AARP, **David Brooks** asked why Americans are so “sad and mean.”

In a classroom at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs, **Dean Keren Yarhi-Milo and Professor Hillary Rodham Clinton** describe how diplomacy is about standing up for your values and interests, and just as important is listening to the “human across the table.”

Both articles emphasize **connection as the antidote** to personal despair as well as a response to geopolitical crises.

(My Story)

I have found myself **feeling** very sad and ready to become very mean. What encourages me to **persevere** seems to be the many opportunities I already have in my “day to day” for “seeing the human across the table.”

Personally, the pandemic, the geographical distance from family and some important friends, and physical aging allow me to anticipate a **future of increasing “isolation.”**

We’ve been disconnected from our **place to be** together by hurricane Ida. 25 OJA had long been a second home. As one of the youth group members years ago told his parents – “FUSW is not a religion, it is a socially responsible country club.” Well, that may be partly accurate.

We were disconnected from our usual **contact** with other humans, in this congregation, with our work colleagues, and with our families by the pandemic.

And further back the membership of the First Unitarian Society experienced the **disconnect with our own leadership** and many of our fellow congregants by not being listened to or heard.

I've heard the term "**covenant**" in various contexts, as in "**we are a covenantal, not a creedal, religion.**" The term makes me think of **Moses** bringing the Ten Commandments down from the mountain and bellowing "this is how you shall be!" The Ten Commandments are mostly "thou shalt **not!**" I don't react well to being told what I "must" do, and I react even more irresponsibly to being told what I "shall not" do (though overall I comply with the Ten Commandments.)

So then why is a covenantal religion the one for me? Why am I here? Because **Unitarian Universalists create their own covenant and work together to live it out.**

In beautiful script our Membership Book opens with "*Covenant In love of the Truth and in the Spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man.*" This was 1918 – not 1856, but still, before you try to grab the book and cross your name out...we have amended our covenant over the years since then.

In our bylaws we open with our purpose (NY State requirement for incorporating as a religious organization)- we "**unite to provide a living medium of spiritual exchange for the service of each other, our community, and humanity.**"

And more recently we devised our "mission statement." Through focus groups and a marathon Saturday workshop, led by the Committee on Ministry, we stated "how we agree to be together." Words from all of us gathered around tables listening to the human across the table, not the unidentified voice from the mountaintop. The resulting Mission Statement? **We are a Liberal Religious Congregation, attempting to shape the world in our image of Love; Deepening Spirituality, Nurturing Community, Advancing Justice.**

We may not have a "place" of our own, yet, but we are committed to exist and thrive as an independent congregation. Our style of leadership, our style of

decision-making, our style of worship – the very fabric of our “being together” - is conversant and connective. We trust each other enough to speak, we trust each other to listen with empathy. This congregation may be a small oasis, but I expect we carry those habits into our interactions throughout the week with others.

Presumably the efforts for *mediation and solutions* in each and every one of the world’s current hotspots of violence, war, aggression, and genocide, are being carried out quietly and fervently behind the scenes by diplomats. Their efforts stay under the radar so as not to take the spotlight away from those in power who are unable to notice the human across the room. A topsy turvy world in my opinion. Let’s seek out and support the organizations working diligently and quietly for peace and coexistence. ***May it ever be so.***