

The Importance of Being Small
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I think it was sometime in the 1970s when my dad attempted to bake a cake. He was following the recipe and it called for two eggs. As the story goes, he decided if two eggs were good, three would be better – so he put in four. Needless to say, I think it was his last attempt at baking. In the years between this story and now, it seems to me the concept of “more or bigger is better” has infiltrated into almost every aspect of our lives. I remember when a large soda at the local McDonald’s was about this size – today, this is medium and the large is huge – and we have the option to super size our order. In the world of technology – the hardware grows smaller but the size of the memory and all the tricks the software can do is so much more than just two years ago. Remember when cell phones were about the size of your shoe and its weight was described in pounds – and all it could do was make a phone call. Now, phones are what, a tenth of the size and not only do they place a call, those same phones can take pictures, receive e-mail, play music and games, send a text message – receive help shopping and can probably super-size your fast food order by tomorrow.

Even in churches – the idea that “more - bigger is better” has found a home. And there are some important advantages to being a large congregation. We here at First Church are considered to be a large congregation in our Association. Being a large church allows for more resources for more programs, classes, services that can be offered to more people. Our faith tradition has an important message for the world and I think it’s great that large churches are growing and our message is being heard and experienced by more people. Nothing wrong with that at all.

And being large has its own set of unique challenges – for some who are used to a smaller congregation, a large one can feel like a bureaucracy; changes in how things happen can be confusing – change is a big opportunity for growth, whether we're ready for it or not. Being in a large congregation it can feel difficult to communicate clearly, especially to the whole group all at once. And because it's hard to have everyone hear the same message at the same time, misunderstandings and confusion can arise. Here's a story, from an unknown source.

A [large] flock of quail once lived near a marsh. They flew every morning to the nearby fields to feed. However, there was one big problem with this arrangement. Near to the fields lived a bird hunter, who used to snare the quail and take them to market to be sold. He had become very proficient at this task, because he was able to imitate the call of the quail leader. When he imitated this call, all the quail thought at their leader was calling them, and they flocked into the hunter's net.

One day, the quail had a meeting, and listened as their leader spoke to them. 'We need to put a stop to this,' he warned them, 'or soon there won't be any of us left. I know how the hunter is doing it. He is imitating my call to lure you into this net. So next time you hear his call, fly to the fields, and let him catch you in his net. But when the net comes down, all poke your heads through the holes in the net together at the same time, fly off with the net up to the thorn bushes. The net will get tangled up in the thorn bushes and you will be able to pull yourselves free of the netting and fly away.'

So this is what the quail did. Every time they heard the hunter's imitation call, they let him catch them, then flew off together, tangled the net up in the thorn bushes and pulled themselves free. The hunter became more and more frustrated. He was making no

money in his trade any more, and his wife was getting very impatient with him. ‘Don’t worry, dear,’ he reassured her. ‘Just wait until the quail begin to argue.’

And sure enough, one day the hunter made his call, and the quail rose up and flew to the field. Just as they were landing, one quail accidentally bumped into another. ‘I’m sorry,’ he apologized. ‘I didn’t see you there.’

‘What do you mean, you didn’t see me?’ the other remonstrated. ‘Are you blind, you clumsy fool? Can’t you look where you’re going?’

‘Well,’ the first quail replied, ‘if you’re going to take that attitude...I said it was an accident!’

In no time, the argument had spread through the flock. The quail all took one side or the other, and very soon, they were all going at each other like bitter enemies. There was chaos on the field. The hunter smiled, as he threw his net over them. But they were far too engrossed in their arguing to remember the agreed procedure.

‘We’re trapped,’ they called out.

‘Let’s fly this way!’ some said.

‘No,’ said the others, ‘that way is safer!’

‘Why should we do what you want all the time,’ the first group replied. ‘You’re always telling us what to do. We’re sick of doing things your way!’

And while they were bickering among themselves, the hunter gathered the whole flock up in his net, took them to market and made a small fortune.” (from the book, one hundred wisdom stories from around the world, page 119).

Another aspect to being a large congregation – it can be easy for someone to feel lonely on the patio – even as crowded as it is. I’m guessing we’ve all experienced at one

time or another, being surrounded by people and feeling lonely. As good as it can be to be large and growing, balance is needed and with the largeness of a congregation, being small is important – very important. Not small in size necessarily – for I want us to continue growing in all the ways we can – but how we do “small” and the advantages of doing “small” well can assist in our on-going growing. Let me say that again, how we "do" small is significant and needs to be very intentional.

One of the best ways we do “small” well is through covenant groups. This sermon is not a commercial for covenant groups – though the Council does want you to know that new groups will be starting in October and you can sign up for these new groups throughout the month of September at tables with signup sheets on the patio. One of the things we get from our faith tradition is that it offers to us a counter culture experience. This community offers a counter perspective to the more/bigger is better line of thinking. This is a sermon to help remind us of the importance of small. The spiritual component here is that we build relationships with one another – that, as our earlier reading said, "we hold one another as vital and sacred" and we treat one another as such. We are in this work, in this learning together and it is here that we practice. It is the small groups within our large congregation that allow for the deeper connections we long for in our lives. It is through small groups that we make friends and experience the heart to heart moments.

We have a large variety of small groups – (which is not an oxymoron) is that an oxymoron? No, there are many small groups already existing within this community. Some of our small groups include the Buddhist Sangha, the Singletarians, the Humanists, Pagans, and there are others. The choir is its own small group as are Neighborhood groups. In the fall we will form other small groups – some through adult religious

education classes and others will form around social events. All of these are useful and are designed with the hopes of meeting people's needs.

Throughout all of these groups forming and experimenting and growing, covenant groups are unique because they are more than social time spent together with people from this church. Small groups will form and meet needs, be they social or educational or support and after the need is met or the information learned, these small groups may disband so the folks can go on to other groups. But covenant groups are different. There is a spiritual component within these groups for they are based on a promise – that's what a covenant is. It's a relationship where the parties have made a promise of support, of showing up and participating, of sharing from their personal experience and deeply listening to each other. It is through the deep listening and sharing that, as was said in our call to worship, "we begin to know ourselves as members of a group and begin to feel the group within ourselves."

Our covenant groups entail deep listening and sharing. And they remain connected to the larger community. They don't become an entity unto themselves, but are a smaller part of a larger whole. I think they hold on to this truth and stay connected for a couple of reasons: there is a trained facilitator that leads the group. There is a structure to the group that people agree to operate within and there is the covenant. The groups have topics for discussion that allow for the sharing to be as deep or shallow as need be. Remember what was said in the testimonial: "At first glance, it might seem like meeting once a month won't develop close relationships – or allow a deep examination of spiritual issues. But the process really works. The format, questions and approach to discussing UU principles brings about a surprising sense of intimacy and inner reflection." This for

me is another aspect of that counter culture experience we get here – being in a covenant group means intentionally setting aside time for reflection. How we need that time. How we need the time of pause in our week, once a month to gather and reflect, to listen and explore.

And as good as all of this is, there is one more aspect that I think is the tie that binds the group members closer to one another and keeps the group as a whole connected and accountable to the church – that is, the service project. It's one thing to sit and listen and share and doing those things help us know one another but working together – rubbing elbows with each other in a job that helps someone else – in my experience, that service project bonds a group in a way that talking and listening does not.

Linda was new to the congregation and still didn't know many people. She attended regularly and it was a small congregation – about 100 but it seemed like everyone knew each other except her. She joined a covenant group and said little in the first few meetings. She shared enough to participate but never very much – she was still feeling her way. She missed one group meeting because she was sick and when she went back the next session, the group had decided on their service project...they would pick up trash along the highway exit ramp not far from their church. So early one Saturday morning, they met at the parking lot and listened to someone from the Transportation Department talk about safety and what to do with the full bags. Then they each put on a pair of gloves, some plastic eye glasses for protection, an orange vest. They each had twice large orange plastic bags and some were handed a pole with teasers on the end to get things. She didn't get one. The small group walked out to the ramp and spread out – a few worked close together and talked while others kept to themselves and picked up

trash. It was amazing how much there was. As the morning wore on and the bags began to fill, they started comparing strange items found in the grass. Someone found a whole six pack of empty beer bottles, someone else found a credit card that had not expired. People began to tease and joke about other items and the sun felt good. By the end of the morning, people were talking freely, including Linda. They hauled their bags to the designated spot and walked back to the van to turn in their equipment. Linda was tired and smiling and talking easily with the others. Somehow working together helped make these new church people feel more like neighbors than church goers. The following covenant group meeting, Linda told me the sharing felt a little deeper and they all, including her, talked more and were late in their closing. At the end of the church year she told me she liked the church alright and what kept her coming back was her covenant group and she wondered how she might lead one. Working together, doing an act of service helped them gel together more as a group. It has long been said that if you're feeling low, one of the best ways out is to find a way to be of service to another.

Sometimes because we are a liberal faith, folks can have some misconceptions of us. Because we do not have a creed, some think that means a person can believe anything they want and still be a member – not exactly. Others might think that because we stand for many issues, we don't take a stand on anything – again, I say not really. And some think that because we don't take attendance – that we are not counting, that their presence doesn't make that much of a difference, they really don't need to be in church. Some folks think or feel that they can be a religious or spiritual person on their own, outside of community. With this, I have to disagree. One last story from UU Minister the Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman, from the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, TX. She tells the story of a

dour, reclusive Scotsman who was not in church for many Sundays. His Presbyterian pastor went to visit him in his humble cottage. When the pastor knocked, the Scotsman opened the door and, without a word, motioned the pastor inside. The man indicated a rocking chair in front of the coal fire for the pastor. He drew up another chair for himself. In silence, the two men sat and watched the burning coals. After a time the pastor stood up, took the fire tongs and put one of the glowing coals to the side of the hearth. He sat down again and began to rock. Both men watched the lone coal as it grew ashen and cold. After a time the pastor again took the tongs, picked up the dead coal, and put it back in the fire. Then he sat down and both men watched as once again it burned brightly with the rest. Without a word the pastor left. The next week the old Scotsman was in church and never missed a Sunday from that time forward. (see Questions for the Religious Journey by George Kimmich Beach, page 142).

One lesson here is obvious – remove a coal or a person from the community, from the fire and alone, it grows cold and begins to die. Return the coal to the fire, the person to the community and the coal burns brightly again. A person returned to community thrives once more. Another lesson is this: the fire, the community needs the individual – when a coal is removed, the fire does not burn as brightly. Your presence here matters. How we are with each other matters. At church the other day, a man stopped me as I was walking. He just needed to tell me something neat – he said he had read Arvid's latest newsletter column and told me how important it was to him...that what Arvid had said spoke directly to him. “You see,” he explained, “a short time back, I had had a difficult day and was feeling stressed and I said some things to a couple of people that now, I wished I hadn't. Then I read his article. It said what I needed to hear. I made a promise to

myself that I am going to read that quote of Thich Nhat Hanh every day for thirty days – as a good reminder of how I want to be in the world – of how I want to speak to others.” And then he left. I thought that was a wonderful idea...and promised myself that I too would practice that – because I know I have room to grow here – and I know I'm not alone. How we are together, with each other, matters.

We are social beings who seek meaning in our lives through our own and others' experiences. We do not thrive when we are left alone and isolated. This church, this religious community offers to you many opportunities to deepen your connection with your best self, with one another and with that which is greater than we are, regardless of the label put on it.

May we here – through small groups, through covenant groups, through religious education classes, in social settings and here in worship – let us take the risk of relationship and practice doing small well. Blessed be and amen.