

## HOW DO WE LIVE IN UNITY?

The transformational theme for September is Unity.

In the Oxford American Dictionary “Unity” is defined as, “the state of being united or joined as a whole. The state of forming a complete and harmonious whole, especially in an artistic context. A thing forming a complex whole.” Its origins are from the Latin *unis*, meaning “one.”

As I meditate on this word, its spiritual meaning seems to be that things, beings and entities that, looked at from one perspective, are perceived as separate, can be seen as being a complex whole when viewed from a wider perspective. From the Buddhist point of view, this is true of everything. That is actually reflected in our language with the term, “universe” for everything that exists. We do not speak of a “multiverse.” In Buddhist terms, that means that nothing, including ourselves, ultimately exists as a separate entity. Everything that is, is really a nexus of processes and relationships, which are impermanent and constantly changing.

An example often given by the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh makes this concept concrete. He will hold up a piece of paper and then point out that the piece of paper does not have a separate self. The paper would not exist if there were no tree from which it was made. The tree would not exist without sun, earth and rain. The tree would not be available to be made into paper without the existence of the logger. And the logger would not exist if not for the logger’s grandmother. If we look deeply enough, we can see that everything in the universe exists in that piece of paper. Thich Nhat Hanh has coined a new word to cover that concept. The word is “inter-being.” All things, beings, and people inter-are.

Shifting our perspective to humans, we too are profoundly inter-connected, not just with other humans but with all beings and all things. In our day to day perceptions, we often act as though this were not true, as though we were separate beings that end with our distinct bodies and personalities. We perceive that we are encountering other and quite separate bodies and personalities. This is an illusion which causes much of human suffering.

Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Forrest Church points us to a deeper but often neglected truth. He wrote, “We humans beings trumpet our differences, even kill each other over them, while, in every way that matters, we are far more alike than we are different. Theologically speaking, we are certainly more alike in our ignorance than we differ in our knowledge. In fact, by the time we die, we will barely have gotten our minds wet. The wisest among us will have but the faintest notion of what life is all about. This counsels humility, but it also affirms oneness. Truly we are one....The acknowledgement of essential unity is the central pillar of my faith.”

Human beings are alike in our deepest needs as well. We want to be safe and protected from outer and inner harm. We want to be happy. We want to be strong and healthy in our bodies. We want to be free of mental suffering and tension. We want to be loved, or at least treated kindly by other people. And we want our lives to mean something to the human family.

Our essential unity is indeed the central pillar of our faith. The more broadly and deeply we can realize this in our lives, the more deeply and profoundly we will live.

Love,

Rev. Arvid

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

This month's spiritual exercise is suggested by religion scholar Karen Armstrong in her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. She writes, "Instead of steeling ourselves against the intrusion of other people's pain, we should regard our exposure to global suffering as a spiritual opportunity. Make a conscious effort to allow these television images to enter your consciousness and take up residence there. Extend your hospitality to them and make place for the other in your life. If a particular image speaks to you strongly, focus on it... bring this image deliberately to mind at various times during the day. Summon it when you are feeling sorry for yourself—or during moments of happiness, when you are filled with gratitude for your good fortune..."

So do that this month. If you resist, check in with yourself to identify what it is that is holding you back. Fear that the suffering of others will overwhelm you? Worry that adding awareness of the suffering of others to your own burdens might be too much for you? Whatever the case may be, and without judging yourself, examine your resistance.

If you would like to take this exercise one step further, it could be that you might come up with a way to lessen this suffering or the suffering of others in a similar situation. Perhaps there is a need that you—and only you—can fill.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Was there a time in your life when you had a direct experience of the unity of all things, or of the profound and surprising relationship between things? Have you had an experience of unity with another person so powerful that your own separate self was forgotten? Or an experience with nature that allowed you to go beyond the consciousness of your separateness?
2. In your own living out of your Unitarian Universalist faith, has it been your experience that, "the acknowledgement of essential unity is the central pillar of my faith," as Forrest Church expresses it? In what ways is this true for you?

## WORDS OF WISDOM

Thomas Merton: “We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”

Ernesto Cardenal: “All human eyes have longing in them.”

Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley: “How the line in life, nature, science, philosophy, religion constantly returns into itself. The opposite poles become one when the circle is completed. All truth revolves about one center. All is a manifestation of one law.”

Maya Angelou: “I would encourage us all, African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Whites, Native Americans to study history. I long for the time when all the human history is taught as one history. I am stronger because you are stronger. I am weaker if you are weak. So we are more alike than we are unlike.”

Joseph Campbell: “Our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life.”

Michael Lerner: “A spiritual sensibility encourages us to see ourselves as part of the fundamental unity of all being. If the thrust of the market ethos has been to foster a competitive individualism, a major thrust of many traditional religious and spiritual sensibilities has been to help us see our connection with all other human beings.”

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books by Thich Nhat Hanh, especially Peace Is Every Step.

Love and Death, by Forrest Church

As you know by now I love the radio show On Being. Here are some interviews that fit our theme: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/asteroids-stars-and-love-god/68> <http://www.onbeing.org/program/no-more-taking-sides/134>

If others of you have books, blogs, audios or articles to recommend, we'll pass them along.