

“The Work of Relating”

**A Sermon by
Reverend Bill Clark**

We met in 1974. We began our careers together working with deaf children; she as a teacher and myself as dorm counselor in the residential school for deaf. We quickly became good friends. We travelled Europe together as she introduced me to the fine art of traveling. Upon my return I moved to NYC and she returned later and moved to SF. We remained long distance friends; calling frequently and rediscovering the fine art of letter writing – remember those days – sitting in café somewhere and writing long detailed letters?

She traveled again throughout the South Pacific and up to Asia – landing a job for a few months in the Republic of Singapore. I followed a similar path years later also landing a job in Singapore staying for two years working with deaf and multi-handicapped children. She was one of the few friends who came to visit me while I was a minister in Texas. The last few years during her spring vacations she would visit me in Provincetown. For the past four years we took two weeks vacations together at a Lake house in Vermont. I taught her how to swim.

Last winter she came to live with me for three months. Currently our 39 year old friendship is on the brink of falling apart.

I tell you all of this not to extract pity or to confirm the adage about house guests are like leftovers – only good for three days. Rather I tell you this because what truly transpired was a total breakdown in communication. Between trying to protect hurt feelings, a lack of honesty, generosity and integrity and the inability to speak our truth to one another – we are both asking ourselves can this 39 year old friendship survive?

In working through shaky and difficult times in personal or professional relationship; be it with long term friends, spouses, co-workers or congregants; it does take intentional work – work that is often painful, poignant and practical. Yet even with the practicality of this work – the results may turn out to be a dramatic shift or even a termination of the relationship – unexpected and unplanned as it may be.

Just in the past few months I have been in conversations with two couples I had married who are in the stage of separating and possibly divorcing. Over the course of the election last year numerous friends informed how the heated political landscape was tearing some of their friendships apart. Facebook “friends” as well. But you can always just “defriend” them..... the easy way out

A colleague tells the story of two very good friends almost torn apart by the results of the election. One was exhilarated and excited about the outcome. The other so

upset she did not go to work for two days. They both, in raising their voices, exclaimed, loudly, “but, don’t you see what he will do to our country.” In frustration they departed company rapidly.

In the book, *The Course of Miracles*, it asked a question that opens this story up for wonderful spiritual reflection. Here it is: Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right? (2X) Would you rather be on good terms with friends and other people as much as possible, or do you want to create enemies over political differences or church business? Can we remain open to continued friendships with those whose views are different from our own? Can we actually open up to the possibility of sharing and learning something from one another – rather than shutting down and closing off. This presents to us a new way and whole new perspective to the work of relating.

The work of relating thus becomes **not** about converting or cajoling anyone to our point of view but, rather about listening, searching, and respecting the many differences among us. In the words of our ancestors “We need not all think alike to love alike.” Yet any work of relating must begin with the ideals of respect, civility and love.

So I ask you. How do you confront conflict or confusions in your personal or professional relationships? Are you able to speak up and speak out with calm

words of communication? Are you able to express your thoughts and feelings rationally finding the courage to speak your truth yet speak with respect, civility and love? Are you able to listen – truly listen to hear the river of emotions underlying the current of conflict, disagreement or confusion? Often times what I hear is the current of fear; fear of loss and separation, fear of anger, fear of change, FEAR.

Or do we sometimes shut down, walk away, walk out – or worse (in my humble opinion) say everything is fine – just fine – and then turn around and triangulate your friends or co-workers by spilling your dissatisfaction to others – yet not to the person you truly need to deal with?

In the words from our morning reading; how much integrity, compassion, faith and hope do we take with us each day as we prepare to walk toward morning? Is there enough willingness to change or to be changed – enough love, gratitude, and truth-telling, to meet others along your way?

It takes incredible courage, enormous compassion and constant commitment to confront conflicts, confusions and incompatibilities in any relationship. The work of relating to others, the labor of building and sustaining relationships requires all of these attributes. This is the work – the holy work of relating and building

relationships of taking it from here (sign relationship to here sign harmony to with the divine.)

And I really believe that if this work is done on a daily basis – just imagine what this world would be; “Imagine all the peoples living life in peace.”

Can there be a more perfect place to be opened to this work of relating than right here in your religious or spiritual community?

Examining this topic of relationships from an ecclesiastical perspective changes the conversation dramatically. For I practice the belief that in our Churches, Temples and Mosques relationships are held to somewhat higher standard. We are asked again and again to respect and honor all who walk through our doors. Especially as Unitarian-Universalist we are challenged to live out our principles; affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings. We are asked to be in what is often called “right relations” with members of our church communities.

This idea of right relations stems from the very meaning of the words – right relations. It is examining the very high standard to be in right relationship with members of your church or congregational community. To me it means to examine and explore how members of the community or Society treat one another; relate, discuss, discern and disagree with one another.

I remember in one church I served two families were locked in a terrible conflict. Threatening anonymous letters and phone calls were made. The police were called into it. Individual members of both families came to vent their anger upon me. I remember thinking to myself here I am attempting to build a beloved community and these families are tearing it apart. I turned to a ministerial mentor for guidance and to vent my anger. “How can there be this kind of anger and conflict in a church community,” I exploded.

“Where ever there is human interaction there is conflict,” he calmly reminded me. It was a harsh reality I had yet to truly face.

A year later some of that anger and conflict bubbled over and came to rest on my office door. I returned from my summer holiday and had just come off a ten day meditation retreat to find a professionally made button pinned to my bulletin board outside my office door that read;

“Bill Clark destroyed our beloved community.” (Story of just returning from retreat.... Rolled off my back)

Clearly we needed to do some work on how we can and should relate to one another. When the Board of Trustees was informed some shrugged it off saying it was probably a practical joke or one of the youth. Really? A youth?

Others wanted to ignore it and sweep under the rug as if it never happened. As hurtful as it was that was not the approach I wished to take. This was a wonderful opportunity for us examine who we were and how we wanted to be together. Was lashing out in an anonymous fashion how we registered how dissatisfaction? Was placing anonymous buttons as a behavior to express our anger something we would tolerate? It was fascinating to observe those members of the Board who practiced conflict avoidance (and there were many) and those who wished to face a conflict head on.

Facing it is what we did. I wore the button in the pulpit. I preached the sermon on Forgiveness. I am still practicing it. During that process I saw the opportunity to ask the difficult questions about how we truly wanted to relate to one another? Was lashing out anonymously to express our anger and dissatisfaction our basis for conflict resolution?

Was this the kind of behavior we wanted to tolerate? Where was the respect, civility and love?

It is like a story often passed around ecclesiastical circles about a man back in the later fifties or early sixties who had a particular unusual way of expressing his dissatisfaction and dislike of a sermon. The man would calmly stand up during the sermon and slowly begin taking off his clothes – one piece at a time – until – you

guessed it – he was completely naked. And he would stand there until the sermon was ended. What was most chilling about this story, however, is that no one in the congregation made him stop. No one!! As a colleague wrote; “they apparently did not want to infringe on his individual right to free expression.” Really?

Whether it is planting anonymous buttons or stripping naked or shouting out during a service these are **behaviors** that should and must be addressed. Right relationship is centered on how congregational members behave together. How they communicate, facilitate, listen, engage and interact with one another? Now certainly the behavior of stripping during a sermon or planting a button is a “way” of communicating something – to someone no matter how inappropriate. Yet if a congregation has processes as to how to communicate dissatisfaction, how to solve conflicts, such behaviors could be eliminated.

In our responsive reading this morning we read “We must sit down and reason together. In the dark we could utter our feelings. In the dark we could propose, describe and suggest. Perhaps we could begin to begin to listen.”

Does it take the darkness or anonymous dialogue for us to be able to speak our truth? Can we not, as a religious and spiritual Society have open dialogue and discussion about our hopes and visions for our religious home?

In another church I served when it came time for the minister's evaluation I suggested an open forum where I would sit down and listen – only listen – as friends and members of the church would speak their truth to me directly – be it praise or criticism – suggestions, proposals or whatever. Yet the only request on my part was they speak their truth keeping in mind; respect, civility and love. I realized this would be a challenge for many, including myself – but isn't that a part of a goal for any religious community – to step out of your comfort zones and take risks? It is like the saying “church is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

The idea was quickly rejected the congregation and the Board. How could I expect members and friends to do such a thing? Not everyone is comfortable in speaking directly to their minister – especially when it is a form of criticism.

My only response was let us at least try it? What kind of beloved community are we creating if people cannot speak their truth to their minister – if they cannot speak their truth to members and friends about their religious home?

Life in any religious community must be about right relations: a place where everyone is welcome no matter our spiritual journey; where we can feel safe expressing our thoughts and feelings, when this expression is done honestly responsibly and with love. As a colleague stated; a church community is that place

“where we know we can disagree and still practice Love as the spirit of this church.” (Reverend Anne Felton Hines: Emerson UU Church, sermon: Nov. 12, 2006)

Many of our church communities from all faiths are taking this ideal of right relations very seriously. Many of our UU congregations develop what are called Covenant of Right Relations or a Behavioral covenant which reminds all how we wish to be treated and how we agree to treat one another. A covenant is a promise we make to one another – with the aim, according senior consultant at the Alban Institute; “Our aim is to help one another to be faithful, to create environments in which the possibilities of reconciliation are increased.”

Any covenant of right relations or discussion of it is there to strengthen, deepen and to make sacred and holy the working relationships within a congregation or Society

So, as you look around here at the Unitarian-Universalist Society of Martha’s Vineyard how does this idea of right relations sit with all of you? As you go through this transition once again, how are your interpersonal relationships? Is this a safe environment for dialogue, discussion or disagreement? Are there processes in place for solving conflicts, expressing dissatisfaction? Are there only the voices of the few that often heard and too many left unheard? In meetings and open

forums is civility, respect and love the basis for communication? Or are there “parking lot conversations” where, only then, feelings and opinions are expressed?

Following the service today we will have the opportunity to further these discussions on right relations. I hope you can attend.

My friends, this is a wonderful opportunity for all to participate in deciding what kind of religious Society you are building and sustaining here on this beautiful island. All of you, church leaders, transitions team, members and friends help to chart the course of this community as to the description of who you are and the direction you wish to go. And, to quote a former NY Yankee (hate to do this here in red sox nation) Yogi Bera, “If you don’t know where you going, you’re sure to end up somewhere else.” May the intention of your work together reflect the beauty of this amazing Island you call home. Amen and Blessed Be

Silent Prayer and Meditation

Closing Hymn:#298 Awake Now my senses (V: 1,3,5)

Benediction:

Love is the spirit of this church

And service is its prayer.

This is our great covenant

To dwell together in peace

To speak the truth in love

And to help one another.