

## **You've Got a Friend: United Nations Sunday**

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL

October 25, 2015

Wherever we have lived, John and I have always had season tickets to the local community theater. Twenty years ago, in Acton, MA, we attended a performance of *Laura*, based on the mystery novel by Vera Caspary. In one scene, the title character leaves the stage to change for an evening at the symphony while her closest friends chat on stage. When she returned in formal 1940's evening gown, the actress had failed to tuck in that little loop sewn into the shoulder of women's clothes meant to keep them from sliding off the hanger. So here we have a woman with that little loop hanging conspicuously down the back of her arm in a room that supposedly contains her very best girlfriend. And nobody did anything about it for the rest of the scene.

For 20 years this has stuck like a burr to my mental socks. I do not remember another thing that happened for the rest of the play, but *this* I remember. And it is because it was so jarringly unreal. She might have well have been wearing the Cheshire Cat on her head. There is not a woman alive who would let their best friend go to the grocery store, let alone the symphony, with the hanger thingy sticking out. Absolute strangers will walk up to you and tuck in an errant tag rather than let another woman walk around with tags hanging out. Yet here, this woman's best friend totally ignores a major wardrobe malfunction. The mystique of the theater can stretch credulity only so far. Friends don't let friends walk around with tags hanging out.

This is the role of friendship that Ralph Waldo Emerson alludes to in the quote printed at the top of your order of service. In 1841, Emerson wrote, "I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frostwork, but the solidest thing we know..." He went on to say, as in the quote, that the two elements of friendship are Truth and Tenderness. Of Truth he wrote, "A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal, that I may drop even... dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought... and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another..."

I think this aspect of Truth in friendship holds great value, to be able to tell the truth about yourself, to be honest and unguarded about who you are, what you believe and what you value. But there is also an aspect of Truth in friendship that is about telling the other person things that may be hard for them to hear and impossible for others, outside a relationship of deep trust, to say. Before I came to UUBN, I shared a co-ministry with a colleague. We formed the co-ministry out of necessity, but became friends in the course of it. We had a tradition called "honesty moments." If we asked each other for feedback, the responder was always free to temper their truth with kindness to whatever extent seemed appropriate. But when an honesty moment was invoked, the responder was honor bound to tell the fullness of their own truth, omitting any equivocation to try and spare the other's feelings. "What did you think of my

sermon?” could evoke a very different answer in an honesty moment than in normal collegial conversation.

This is not to say that a friend is there for you to critique. Understand that your opinions and observations are yours alone. But a relationship of mutuality and trust is where we can explore those things we can't see ourselves, things that might be holding us back from achieving our goals. Friendships are places of trust where honesty moments are helpful, not hurtful. Truth is valuable and necessary from both sides of friendship, from the aspect of revealing your true self but also from the aspect of being honest with the other.

Emerson's contemporary, the poet Dinah Craik, put it this way:

*Oh, the comfort—the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person—having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.*

Craik's words speak not only to the truthfulness of friendships, but also to Emerson's second element, Tenderness. Of Tenderness Emerson wrote, “We are holden to men by every sort of tie, by blood, by pride, by fear, by hope, by lucre, by lust, by hate, by admiration, by every circumstance and badge and trifle, but we can scarce believe that so much character can subsist in another as to draw us by love. Can another be so blessed, and we so pure, that we can offer him tenderness? When a man becomes dear to me, I have touched the goal of fortune...” Tenderness is perhaps what we think of most readily with friendship. A friend in need is a friend indeed. As the choir sang last week, “when you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand...” Or as we will sing in just a few minutes, “Lean on me when you're not strong. I'll be your friend. I'll help you carry on.” In happy times, too, we consider the Tenderness of friendship. We think of the joy that friends bring us—shared experiences, rituals of tradition, inside jokes and rooting for the Cubs together.

Truth and Tenderness, together they make up the grout that holds relationships together. The same is true for wider relationships—for groups and organizations and even nations. Amity within all these structures is based on honesty and showing care no less than they are for individuals. Today, as we celebrate United Nations Sunday and its 70th anniversary, I cannot help but think that these matters of friendship are what that organization is all about. The mission of the United Nations is, after all, is to forge relationships of trust that bond the people of many nations together.

Though couched more in the language of diplomatic gravitas than poetry, the United Nations Charter gives as its purpose the development of “friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination.” It takes Truth and it takes Tenderness to navigate this intention “to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations.” It takes both Truth and Tenderness to explore solutions to the economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems that impact us all. As my colleague Gary Kowalski wrote: *perhaps you didn't need a university study or a mathematical analysis to tell you what the world's religions have affirmed for centuries. The best way to bring our world closer together—to lower the degree of separation and strife—is the old-fashioned way, though charity and compassion, by*

*practicing patience and tolerance and goodwill, turning strangers into friends and enemies into conversation partners, one by one by one.*

When I think of the purposes set forth in UN Charter, it is the humanitarian and peacemaking roles that I think of first, the Tenderness side of its mission. But it doesn't take long for the image of Nikita Khrushchev's outrage (and the alleged shoe banging incident) to remind me that creating peace and justice require Truth telling, confronting powers of oppression. On the international stage as in personal relations we cannot sublimate Truth to Tenderness if authentic and mutual friendship is to be sustained. If your friends won't tell you that there's spinach in your teeth then much worse humiliations await you in the world. If we cannot speak Truth to power we have little chance to further the causes of justice, freedom, and peace. If we cannot, in covenanted community, call each other to the best that is within us, then we are missing an opportunity to move beyond our present condition.

Back in my twenties, when job changes and apartment moves were more frequent, we defined a friend as someone who would help you move for no more price than pizza and beer. I still think defining a friend as someone who will help you move is a pretty apt description. It's just that now "to move" doesn't mean boxing up your worldly possessions and lugging them down to the truck. Now, I realize that the real moving a friend helps you with is the movement of mind and heart and spirit, to move beyond our present condition, to grow. It is in creating friendships that we learn to ask questions and really listen for the answers, to set aside our own concerns in order to hear what is important to someone else. It is with our true friends that we learn to balance Tenderness and Truth, that we learn how to drop the pretenses and make ourselves vulnerable, and where we thus learn the benefits of vulnerability. The best of friendships are where we learn humility, learn to stop measuring ourselves against others, to stop puffing ourselves up and putting ourselves down. It is where we learn to be fully, messily and divinely human.

The Upaddha Sutra of Buddhism tells the story of the Buddha sitting with one of his disciples, the Venerable Ananda. Breaking the silence, Ananda declares that having worthy friends and colleagues is fully half of the holy life. "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that," the Buddha replies. "Having admirable friends is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable friends he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path." The Buddha goes on to say that it is through his friends that the monk develops right resolve, right speech, right action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Therefore having these friends is the whole of a worthy spiritual life.

In other words, a friend is someone who will help you move, or as Emerson wrote, "The essence of friendship is entireness, a total magnanimity and trust... It treats its object as a god, that it may deify both." A friendship is a space in which we are able to know and become ourselves. And that is a friendship that this church offers you. Our third and fourth principles affirm encouragement to spiritual growth and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Last week we held the first session of the Exploring UU class that we offer twice a year. One of the things I do in that session is ask people to respond to a series of statements for which there is no single right answer but a range of opinion. People signal where they stand on the issue by literally standing at some point along the center aisle. One participant said that this was the

second time she had come to the Exploring sessions, and that the last time she had stood in a different place. The fact that she had moved to a new location, she said, reflected the growth she had undergone as by being a part of this church. This is putting our principles of encouragement to spiritual growth and a free search into action. I hope that we are friends who can help you move.

But friends play other roles in our lives, other than helping us to personal and spiritual growth. The Tenderness part of friendship also leads us to care for our friends just as they may care for us in times of need. As our responsive reading said, we are in need of each other all our lives. This is true; we are never quite as independent as we all imagine. But there are also times of deepest need when we cannot even pretend to independence. It comes to all of us, this time of deep need when we cannot fully care for ourselves. Whether through a moment of crisis or as we approach the end of long life, we all face some time when the care of others is necessary. At this point our friends become indispensable. Whether these friends are related to you by birth, whether they are the friends you cultivate or whether they are the friends gathered by common bond as in this church, their care can make a world of difference.

Many of us have the wherewithal to pay for the various kinds of help we need and cannot provide for ourselves—medical care, housing, food and so forth—but you cannot pay for depth of caring. It is the love of friends that makes all the difference. Perhaps the biggest surprise to me in ministry has been the number of people who come to the church for assistance in times of crisis who have never given any thought to the idea that some day they would need help, that some day they would need a friend. I know that people struggle with all sorts of barriers that keep them from connecting to others, but so many folks in their days of strength and independence turn their backs on others that when they come to need help themselves they find they are alone. That is another friendship role that this church can play for you, for anyone, that whatever it is you need to face you do not have to face it alone.

Both of these things that friends offer us are wonderful—growth and care. I would not do without them. But let's face it, the most immediate reason why we make friends and tend to our friendships is because it makes us happy. When we are five years old we don't make friends because someday I'll break a leg and who will drive me to the doctor then. When we are ten we don't spend all day with our best buddy hoping they will school us in humility and honesty. We make friends, we keep friends, because we enjoy them. And so, as everything else in this church semester has, it comes down to happiness, to human flourishing. Through friendship we become most fully alive and most fully ourselves. In this church, you've got a friend.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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