

# The Paradox of Creating a Community of Individuals

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My career choices have required my studying human development, a subject that intrigues me. We all go through similar developmental stages as we make the journey from being joined physically and emotionally to our mothers to becoming separate individuals in our own right. While the stages are universal, they obviously do not create carbon copies. We are not all the same. We are each unique, even if we are an identical twin sharing the same genes, family, and history with another. We seem to be programmed to make this journey but the route we take is often impacted by how we experience external factors. As an example, my younger sister and I are only four years apart but those four years have made us very different people. We may have grown up in the same family but apparently in parallel universes. We had very different sets of experiences. Even when they were shared, we interpreted them very differently. As a result we made very different life choices and have lived very different lives. For instance, she has lived half of her life in the same house and never more than 100 miles from where my parents finally settled down when she was twelve.

I, on the other hand, made my first move at six weeks and it did not slow down from there. I had been to five different schools by the time I was twelve. By the time I finished high school I had lived in nine different towns or cities, one of them twice. By the time I was 21 I had lived in 21 different domiciles. That nomadic life didn't end there. I have lived in ten US states, four of them twice, Spain and now New Zealand. The longest I have lived anywhere is by far here in Auckland. While I hope the peripatetic phase of my life has concluded, I am not sorry for all the experiences it provided. One of the gifts imitating a rolling stone provided is an appreciation for community. For me, finding it was hard. Entering into it was harder. It was important to me, not just because we want what we don't have, but because without community it is difficult to become all our individual selves are intended or able to be.

My belief in the value of community was so strong I specialised in community development in my tertiary education and spent eight years creating communities in the university context. Later, the opportunity religion provides to build strong communities was key to my decision to leave my career in higher education to pursue the ministry. Yes, our spiritual needs can be met individually, but religion offers community. But creating community within religion comes at a cost.

Unitarian Universalist minister, Cheryl Walker, shared her example in the Winter 2015 issue of *UU World*.

*Sunday morning. My family and I are on our way to worship services. We walk the streets of Harlem, my brother and father in dark suits with bow ties; my sisters, my mother, and I dressed in white. The sea of people parts to let us pass; we are strong and confident, invulnerable. It is the early sixties and we are on our way to Muhammad's Mosque No. 7. We will meet others like us and greet each other with the familiar hand grasp, kiss, and blessings of "as-salaam-alaikum" (peace be unto you). We are powerful.*

*Our power comes from our collectiveness. Because we act as one we are able to build schools, publish newspapers, and start businesses. We have an unshakeable sense of who we are, proud black women and men, which shields us from the racism that is pervasive in all other parts of our lives. We are not inculcated with a sense of inferiority; just the opposite, we have an unwavering sense of innate superiority. Our difference feels like a badge of honour, not one of shame.*

*Yet a shadow side exists. We are strong only if we are willing to conform. The rules are strict and there is no tolerance for breaking them. The price to pay for the power of this type of community is the loss of individuality. For some, me included, the price became too high, and so in my teenage years I made the choice to separate from the community; not from the faith but from the community, for I still loved many things about the faith of my childhood.*

*I kept my faith but lost my religion.*

She went on to tell her story of finding Unitarianism. After years of wandering in a religious wilderness, a friend invited her to a Unitarian church where there was a black woman in the pulpit and banners with the symbols of the world's faiths hanging on the sanctuary walls, including one with a star and crescent. It was love at first sight. In her words, "I fell in love with being an *individual* in a faith community. I was like a kid in a candy store. Me, me, me. My faith, my journey, my religion. It's all about me. This religion was created with me in mind, just waiting for the day that I would show up and make it complete."

However, with time she discovered the shadow side of being a Unitarian, "There was no discipline of faith. It required little of me. All I had to do was sign a book and give some money and, *voila!*—I was a Unitarian Universalist. This group of people had no cohesion beyond a single congregation, and even within congregations there was little or no cohesion. Everyone had come thinking this religion was made just for them, even those people who had grown up in this faith. Therefore everyone thought everything should be for them. This wasn't individuality, it was individualism, worship of the individual."

The Reverend Walker has laid out the challenge for us as Unitarians. How to create a community out of a group of freethinking, independent, outspoken individualists? I know desiring community is the primary draw for many of you. It came out in some congregational discussions we had last year. It is easy to form a club where everyone is a mirror for yourself, similar in race, education, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, politics, spiritual beliefs and the like. It is not so easy to create the inclusive community we claim to want while worshipping individualism. Individuality recognises that we are each unique and special. Individualism wants everyone to be and think like us. If they don't, we are out of here. Think of Brexit or supporters of Trump.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker and early sociologist, was intrigued during a visit in 1831 by the American experiment of creating a democracy out of individuals. He sought to answer the question of how do you create a civil society that allows the individual to act freely while respecting the rights of others to do so? In part, he felt individualism had to be held in check. When it wasn't, liberty and civil society were threatened. When independence is threatened, individuals are not strong enough to fight alone and have any chance of repelling the threat "The only guarantee of liberty is for everyone to combine forces. But such a combination is not always in evidence," he observed.

For two centuries, sympathetic observers from Thomas Jefferson to scholar Diana Eck, a Harvard professor of Comparative Religion, have said that Unitarian Universalism can be the religion of the future: not that we are, but that we can be.

As a result of our being much like America, in that we share the paradoxical ideals of democratic community and individualism, Unitarian Universalists have been the frequent object of studies by sociologists of religion.

In a journal of sociology, Katrina Hoop outlines her study of one Unitarian congregation. She concludes that to the degree we accomplish community and uphold individuality, it is through our rituals and our rhetoric. She observes that the worship service using symbols such as the flaming chalice, reciting our covenant, sharing joys and concerns, time for all ages, songs that reflect our values, the sermon, morning tea and, last but not least, a time for notices foster a sense of common identity while respecting the individual. But even more important to our sense of community is the rhetoric we use, of which she identifies two kinds: positive and negative. Our positive rhetoric focuses on our seven principles and commitment to welcoming a richness of diversity in theology, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age. Our negative rhetoric focuses on how both society and we fall short of our values. I guess this sermon is the latter.

The UUA (the Unitarian Universalist Association) recognised a few years back that while we could be the religion of the future we remain a small religious minority. In spite of being a justice-seeking faith, in spite of the ministries to which we are committed, in spite of the marketing we have done, we have not grown. No matter how you slant the data, we have shrunk considerably from when this congregation had 400 members before the First World War. This is true throughout the Unitarian Universalist world.

In response the UUA commissioned a study of its members in 1997 called *Fulfilling the Promise*. It was an initiative to strengthen a sense of connectedness, interdependence, and community, partly to counterbalance a perceived excessive emphasis on individualism. When the report came out the UUA invited Robert Bellah, a renowned professor of sociology of religion, to respond to it. Bellah is a committed Episcopalian trinitarian, who through his work at Harvard is a friend and colleague of several notable Unitarian thinkers. He acknowledged that while his theology was very different from ours, he was in solid agreement with our social witness regarding inclusiveness, making peace, and seeking social and economic justice. The depth and breadth of his response is much too great to relate in depth today. There is probably fodder for a dozen sermons in it, but there are some key points I would like to emphasise this morning.

Before focusing on the results of the study he pointed out our social witness makes us strong dissenters, especially dissenting from economic orthodoxy in today's America; but religiously, and therefore culturally, we are mainstream, right at the American centre. How can that be? Our whole tradition has been one of religious dissent from beginning to end. "Yes, it has been," he acknowledged. "The problem is that the majority of American religions have been in the dissenting tradition." "In America," English poet G K Chesterton observed, "even the Catholics are Protestants." What does it mean to be a dissenter in a society with a religious majority of dissenters? It certainly doesn't mean that the dissenters agree. They are much too busy dissenting from each other. It means, religiously speaking, Unitarians are part of the majority in that one of our deepest beliefs is shared by a majority of Americans: That in matters of religion the individual conscience must be unfettered. A Gallup poll found 80 per cent of Americans agreed with the statement, "An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." I suspect that similar results would be found in New Zealand. The implication is that in this regard we are not all that special or different.

Assessing Unitarians' hope of *Fulfilling the Promise* through community, Bellah does not find much encouragement in the study's results. First he points out that the first five of

our seven principles are individualistic affirmations and that the last two are not enough of an offset to a fundamentally individualistic position.

He then looks at some of the answers to the questionnaire that was the basis of the study.

“What role has your congregation played most importantly in your life?” Some 56 per cent chose “It supports my views and upholds my values,” which he takes to be an individualistic affirmation of what the congregation is doing for me. The second most popular answer to this question gives a clear alternative to the first choice: “It is a beloved community of forgiveness, love and spiritual growth,” and that answer, one that placed the community first rather than the self, drew 44 per cent. These answers suggest that in spite of the clear priority of religious individualism, there is an undercurrent of desire for an understanding that is fundamentally more social.

The last question was, “What is the ‘glue’ that binds individual Unitarians and congregations together?” The 65 per cent majority answer was: “Shared values and principles.” That is certainly encouraging for those who fear Unitarians hold such different positions that they share very little. The least chosen answer to this question, indeed the one that over 61 per cent said was “least important” was “common worship elements and language.” Bellah finds this discouraging: “There may be hidden problems in this answer that I’m not seeing, but if it means that ‘common worship’ is least important in what holds Unitarians together, then my anxiety level does indeed rise. For it is my understanding as a sociologist of religion that it is common worship that creates the beloved community for which many Unitarians yearn. Furthermore, shared values and principles don’t necessarily motivate people to do anything; whereas a vital experience of common worship can send a congregation out into the world with a determination to see that those values and principles are put into practice.”

What are the implications of these answers? Unitarian historian Conrad Wright in his book *Congregational Polity* singles out three attitudes that remain imperfectly reconciled in the hearts and minds of Unitarians—institutionalism, parochialism, and individualism. By individualism he means the emphasis on the individual seeker, so that the person barely needs the congregation, much less the denomination. By parochialism he means the attitude, common enough in all denominations, to consider one’s own local congregation sufficient, so that “the church” comes to mean my church down by the corner. Parochialism is only the repeat of radical individualism at the congregational level. And by institutionalism Wright means a concern for larger structures and agencies, particularly at the denominational level, which will facilitate the religious life of congregations and enhance their joint impact on the world. Neither among Unitarians nor among other Americans has institutionalism ever had an easy time, or even a good name. I know in my spiritual journey I have had a love/hate relationship with institutions. And yet, without good institutions there will not be good communities and without good communities there will not be good individuals.

I guess what I want to leave you with today is my hope that in spite of our innate desire for this congregation to be, in the language of Apple, an iChurch intent on meeting our individual personal spiritual needs, that we will find something greater than ourselves of which we are apart. I hope we will find that worthy of worshipping, rather than individualism. I hope we will find spiritual strength through our common worship to make a difference collectively outside these walls. That we might be part of the centre of gravity made up by other religious, civic, and political organisations that share our values to bring the world together in all its differences. For the value of community is that it is

only there that we discover how to be fully human. Only in community can we celebrate being the unique, special person each of us is. That is the future church I hope we can be.