



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

ANZUUA Service

Connection and disconnection: the story of our lives

Clay Nelson © 23 August 2020

From the moment of our birth we are introduced to the distress of disconnection and the comfort of connection. We may not remember the cutting of the cord and the first time we were held to breast, but they were momentous. If our lives were a symphony, these were the overture. The motif of disconnection and connection has been embedded in who we are and repeated over and over again, albeit with many variations, ever since.

The worldwide pandemic is one such variation. It is as universal as the birth experience. No one is untouched by it. The motif could not be more strident or discordant. I can't think of another time in history when this was true, not even 9/11 — or 12/9 as we experienced it downunder — compares. The disconnection has nearly drowned out connection even as we share the experience of fear, anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty. Ironic isn't it?

It is an existential crisis. A multitude of studies have shown conclusively that human connection is essential in maintaining our overall emotional, spiritual and physical health. What exactly is human connection? Human connection is an energy exchange between people who are paying attention to one another. It has the power to deepen the moment, inspire change and build trust. It is a challenge to achieve from two metres a part with a mask covering our smile. How we long for a hug. Yet achieve it we must, as it is the foundation for social connection.

What is Social Connection? When researchers refer to the concept of "social connection," they mean the feeling that you belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that this is a core psychological need essential to feeling satisfied with your life.

Data indicates that we can increase social connections through practising compassion for others as well as for ourselves. Another way is contributing to our community. Focusing on what we give, not on what we get or what others got.

Lastly and most importantly, connecting with yourself. We must know who we are and have confidence in ourselves if we desire to connect with others.

If nothing else, Covid has made clear the truth behind the Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle, everything is a part of an interdependent web of existence -- even a deadly virus. This speaks to the connection counterpoint of the motif.

An important way we discover our connection is through our stories. What is the nature of our connection to the natural world, to the universe, to one another? What connections, webs of relationships, do you notice?

We can tell our stories of connection and transformation in the natural world.

- Poet Annie Dillard describes a startling encounter with a weasel when they locked eyes for the longest moment, feeling as if they exchanged souls for that instant. Her writings are filled with perceptive descriptions of connection within Nature and spirit.
- Albert Schweitzer tells of the church bells ringing right when he was aiming his slingshot at a songbird. That was the last time he thought of killing a bird. He later became a world renown humanitarian, living a life of medical service.
- Environmentalist Aldo Leopold tells of when he was young and part of the rampant wolf-killing culture, of shooting a wolf and looking the wolf in the eyes as he died. Never again.

We can tell stories from our area of expertise.

- Scientists can tell about how we share genes with other organisms—would you believe that bananas are our distant cousins. They share 60% of our genes.
- Scientists can tell about the genes in our bodies, and about how our bodies are mostly not human because of the trillions of microorganisms we carry to keep us alive. They call it the microbiome. It is our personal support system!
- Physicists can try to explain that at the quantum level, a concept beyond our understanding, everything is entangled with everything else. It may be the last mystery of the universe to be unravelled. And then again we may never understand it, only experience it.

We can tell stories from the milestones in our lives, times of mourning, times of celebration, times of achieving a dream, times of testing, times of inspiration, times of hope and despair.

We can tell stories from our everyday lives. What did we have for dinner or binge on Netflix afterwards. What our boss said today. We can reminisce about our ancestors or favourite holiday trip or first kiss.

As UUs we can share our self-effacing jokes. What we like about our congregation or fellowship. Why we keep coming back when identifying with a faith movement is becoming an anachronism. How we felt when we with our fellow UUs stood up for social, racial, economic and environmental justice. How we discovered this one-of-a-kind faith movement that has no creed in the first place, for 90% of us weren't born to it. Each story will be unique. Let me share mine as an example.

Mine is a journey of connection and disconnection. It began when a UU couple from All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC gave me a generous grant to go to an Episcopal seminary. My next encounter was during my clinical training in a mental hospital. My co-chaplain was a UU. We hit it off and became good friends, frequently taking the piss about each other's theology. One of my favourite memories was his trying to preach on the Trinity to a room full of schizophrenic patients. They saw right through his discomfort. They were crazy, not dumb.

After 16 years of putting up with homophobic and misogynistic conservatives holding the Episcopal church hostage, I decided to move on. The problem was I didn't know where. It was as much of a surprise as the grant I received when I found out. A 400-member UU church in Santa Barbara asked me to be their administrator. It felt like coming home. Four years later I served a congregation of similar size in Sacramento for another four years in the same capacity. It was there I was encouraged to take steps to be recognised as a UU Minister. When that was nearly completed George W Bush got re-elected and I decided to see more of the world. Sadly, for me I couldn't make a living in NZ as a UU minister. As an alternative I fell in with the most progressive Anglican church in NZ. While there I was discovered by some Auckland Unitarians and invited to preach periodically. After nine years of being infamous for my billboards, I retired as an Anglican priest to the bishop's relief and three months later began my tenure as minister for the Auckland Unitarians. I was home again once more. That was six years ago.

In reflection on my journey I have wondered why I was so drawn to our tradition, when there was much I loved about my Anglican heritage. I think it goes back to the motif of connection and disconnection I have heard play repeatedly throughout my life.

Some religions teach that suffering and injustice in the world are caused by sin, people lacking in the right beliefs, and the wrath of a punishing God. They conclude that people are in need of repentance and salvation.

In our tradition, we see disconnection as the root of the suffering and injustice in the world. People are often disconnected from their deepest selves, from one another, and from a sense of belonging to a greater whole. We see salvation as the experience of connection, here and now, in this life. Connection to greater depth, meaning and purpose heals and

gives life meaning and joy. When we recognise our profound interconnection with one another, we wake up to what we can do to contribute and serve needs greater than our own.