

Ingathering
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
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The home I grew up in had a fabulous maple tree that shaded the back patio. Its leaves grew a brilliant, vibrant yellow each autumn. When they fell it was in great swathes, perfect yellow maple leaves floating down like a benediction. And we raked them...raked them into a huge pile only to fling ourselves headlong into them, secure and safe in the thickness of the pile, rolling and throwing our arms upward to shower ourselves with leaves, laughing, leaping, loving the moment and each other.

The time of year we call “Ingathering” in UU churches is, traditionally, the autumnal equinox (this year Sept. 22). In most places UU churches are in “vacation mode,” usually with the minister away and lay-led services or special activities filling in for regular “church.” Then after school starts everyone is back in their routines, and the “Ingathering” celebrates the return and re-gathering of the community.

Here on Nantucket our “Ingathering” is the first Sunday after Columbus Day, when we return to our cozy winter quarters, after most of the summer visitors have departed and the year-rounders are done with the summer pursuits that take us, sometimes, to far-flung places and, sometimes, simply keep us very busy here.

“Ingathering” as a time of celebration and gathering-together goes back in human history to the beginnings of agriculture, when people in small communities worked together to bring the harvest home and store it safely for the winter. It has ancient pagan roots, but its most powerful heritage is that we carry in our DNA. Gathering in community, with its echoes of security and preparation, reverberates in the human unconscious: “We are together, we have food and shelter, we are safe.”

When I think about why we gather in community, I think about that wonderful maple tree of my childhood and the sense of celebration and wholeness that came with the traditional ritual of raking leaves and playing joyously together in them. Everyone joined in: even my own parents leapt into the leaves, and my grandmother would stand laughing to one side. Someone always had a camera, but the fading photographs are not as vivid as the emotional memories.

On Friday evening I saw children gathered here where I stand, lying down on piles of cushions and snuggled together to watch a movie. The pulpit was off to one side, the television showing Shrek 2 was directly in front, and the children sprawled here and there on floor and bench, tucked up with blankets, laughing together, snug and warm and safe with the knowledge that an entire community of adults was just on the other side of the wall.

We gather in community because it helps our children know there are others who care about them, that there is not just one or two struggling parents who look after them, that they have a place other than home where they can be themselves and utterly safe.

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And the parents in the back room, some of them having a “night out” for the first time in a long time, some older and with children long grown who see themselves in a new role, able and confident and solid, as they bring special dishes that take more than ten minutes in a microwave and chat with the young parents who remind them in various ways of their own children.

People sometimes ask me why anyone goes to church at all these days. It’s a question that interests me greatly, one I think about often, one that gets me onto my soapbox a little.

The obvious point is our pluralistic and largely secular society now accepts non-participation in religious community to a degree that was unimaginable just 50 years ago. This year we celebrate our 200th anniversary as a congregation. Two centuries. Our forebears who celebrated the 150th anniversary probably could not have envisioned a society where it is so completely acceptable to live unconnected to a religious community.

It is a good thing that our society has changed enough that people do not feel compelled to fake their way through a religious service, to attend and recite words that have no meaning; words, even, to which they feel a real antipathy.

I lived that way for almost ten years of my life: frustrated with the disconnect between what I thought about religion and what I found in the houses of worship, I abandoned organized religion for spiritual practice. The forest became my cathedral, and the disciplined movements of ancient traditional moving meditation became my rituals. There was much good in it, and I liked the people I met.

“I am a part of all that I have met.”²

Alfred Lord Tennyson said that. I think it’s true. All that I bring to this moment, all of myself, has been influenced and shaped by all I have met. And I, too, have left a part of myself with all those others; never just an unchanged catalyst, but always changed, always a part of me left behind.

So why religious community? Why the Unitarian Church?

The open door that often brings people in is the opportunity to be who we are, religiously, while participating with others in a Sunday service that reflects our shared values. We are many different theologies here, keeping what we like from our religious upbringing, and taking in new ideas and practices that we have encountered along the way. It can be incredibly liberating, and welcoming, to enter this religious community for the first time. People often say it is like coming home for the first time.

And why do people stay in this community, or any religious community? In the end it is not because of theological freedom alone. It can’t be. There is freedom, after all, outside the religious community.

So, people ask me, why does anyone go to church these days?

² Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), “Ulysses,” in *Victorian Prose and Poetry*, ed. Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (New York, Oxford, and Toronto: Oxford U. P., 1973) pp. 416-418.

It is for community.

It is because of the connections we make and the way we support one another. It is because we create a village here within these walls, while we remain committed to a shared vision of a better world outside of them. It is because we find here people of all ages, with different life experiences, who are willing to be in community together. It is because we can bring our children here and know they will meet other people who will love them, too.

Becoming part of a Unitarian congregation does not mean leaving behind all the problems that plague humanity. Though we share values, and covenant together to treat each other with respect and compassion, we are still entirely human.

I love what Mother Theresa said about community. Now, Mother Theresa was the sort of person who built an amazing community starting with a penny and a single piece of string, so community was something she understood quite well. She said: “Keep in mind that our community is not composed of those who are already saints, but of those who are trying to become saints.”³

Those of us who have given up the idea of saints and sainthood, especially for ourselves, can understand what she means about “trying to become saints.” The way we live some of our values is mostly aspirational. We try to practice right relations with one another. Sometimes we fail. But the idea of community is that we don’t give up on one another, or on the community, or on ourselves...but keep on doing our best, and trying to grow, in confidence that we are welcome here. We may not always agree, and sometimes our disagreements will result in hurt feelings. It is inevitable. We owe it to one another to be, in Mother Theresa’s words, “extremely patient with each other's faults and failures.”

But the idea of community does not begin and end with a tolerance for faults and failures. That kind of community would be a fairly grim place.

If there is to be a reason to remain in community, our gatherings must bring us joy. In a spiritual sense, they must be filled with the colorful leaves we have thrown into the air. In a practical sense, they must be filled with love and trust.

Each of us has our unique gifts to bring to the community. Marianne Williamson said: “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”⁴

If there only one reason to gather together as a religious community, here, at Nantucket’s Unitarian Church, let it be because we covenant with one another to let our own light shine, and encourage others to let theirs shine, too. If we do that, this Meeting House will be a place of joy, the cradle of our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Let us each bring the jigsaw pieces of our gifts and differences, and working joyfully with each other, fit them together so they are a community.

³ Mother Theresa, *No Greater Love*, with Becky Benenate and Joseph Durepos (New World Library 1997).

⁴ Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love* (HarperCollins, 1st Edition 1992).