



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Companioning as Communion”

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Centering Thoughts:

Love is emotion held in utter stillness. Robert Sardello

Sermon:

Dear fellow UUs, I start by stating the obvious: All of America is shaking from a whirlwind stirred up by the Donald Trump Presidency. Changes are coming fast and furious, and concerns abound. Our progressive values are taking a beating.

I readily acknowledge... a few of you here had your reasons to vote *for* this Presidential change. Please hear me. This whirlwind is *not* of Donald Trumps’ making. Through this election, he just brought it front-and-center. This storm has been becoming fiercer for a long time. I frame it in shadow language. *America’s emotional shadow can no longer be denied.* What we are witnessing—and feeling in our guts—are the insidious emotions of this social shadow.

President Trump did not create the shadow. The undercurrents have been fomenting for a long while. Through his public prominence, he just brought the specter into our living rooms, into our lives. But this insular, populist movement has been seething for decades. Recall the rise of the Tea Party. Now we cannot deny the active role of a conservative backlash. It elected a President.

Emotion is another name for this whirlwind. That’s how it shows up in our bodies. It shows up as feelings. Especially as opposition: your opinions and my opinions; your truths, my truths; us/them stances. Different so-called truths colliding right here (*solar plexus*)—in our bodies—long before they show up in angry public attitudes, *and* in amazing protests.

Like:

- The Sister Marches,
- The Pride demonstrations,
- The Anti-Islamophobia rallies,
- We could name more.

We have a new social context. It’s stirring everywhere across our country. Emotion is the stream carrying it wherever it goes. Have you noticed? Emotions seem to rule, don’t they?

Oh how so many of us long for civility in our country!

One question keeps popping up: “What are we going to do?” Certainly we have to face our feelings. We can’t hide; though we *can* distract ourselves. Like with March Madness, or the Master’s Tournament, or a movie, or an afternoon at a park with the kids. Anything to get our minds off of this. But..., while we aren’t noticing, that shadow keeps bringing its devilish damage.

No question: we’ve got to face that shadow. But how do we face it? How can we learn to start

healing America's shadow? We just deal with our demons. Do it. That's the way in. That's what blocks the entrance. Then move underneath those heavy emotions that grip us. Go there—into that deep place of not-knowing. Enter by releasing shadow's stubborn strengths and awaken to soul work that remains with us always.

This move will take safe settings. Small gatherings where emotions can be spoken and explored without leading to angry opposition. Safe settings where emotions can just be heard and held; not acted from. We need to try something different that holds potential and shows real promise. That is what I want to explore with you. I don't choose a national forum. Let's do this trust work in community, in congregational settings, in friendships. Keep it local.

The national tensions stir within each of us. Here in small, local settings—here in your Fellowship—you can learn how to “hold that tension” in a healthy and healing way. What you do locally can then ripple out and spread its influence elsewhere as a “way of healing.” This is what I want us to look at. Start right here where you can feel the full effect. Learn how to tame your emotions and feel your souls healing and growing into a body wisdom grounded in love. Our nation is seething with divisive, destructive energies. That drama is not necessary. But people are skeptical. They remain blind to options that can actually help.

Now I'll frame the dilemma with this question: How can we be together in ways that bring healing and hope? Ways we can speak from our feelings with our hearts, and honestly be heard; honestly seen by others for what we say and how we feel? Hearing each other is always the *best first step*. Whether the “other” is your spouse, your children, a co-worker, a friend, a neighbor, or—yes—a fellow member of this fellowship.

It all starts by creating a safe space. A space where the tension *can* be held with the shared desire to “hear each other deeply.” Healing can happen. It probably *will* happen, if love is present.

What does it take? A desire and a commitment to do this emotional work. To do it with each other as caring companions in intentional settings.

You can even do this as a twosome, but there needs always to be a trusted other present. Now, what I'm going to say may surprise you. There are different ways to have a “trusted other.” If your spiritual life includes God, or Christ, or Buddha, or the Goddess for example, that “Other” can be the third companion. That larger “Something More” holds you in its embrace. The practice works if all those present are reverently willing to do the emotional work.

Now let us move forward from this “talking about.” Let's enter into real felt experience. I will pick a live example for us.

A difficult emotional challenge that affects many of us is when a family dynamic comes to an impasse. One member of the family persistently, presents problems for the rest of the family. The problems become complicated. Exacerbated. Drugs, alcohol, emotional flair-ups, maybe mental illness; and even life-threatening abuse throws “fuel on the fire.” The family is brought to a difficult decision: “cut off all connection” with that relative.

It would be my guess that many of you here have had to deal with some version of this. You may currently be facing some such challenge. One person whose life is in a shambles is (or has) imposed upon the lives of every other member in your extended family. Each family member is left with the challenge, “How best can I deal with that person? What to do?”

This kind of tension is similar to the tensions in our nation. The only difference is this: “The problem is right in our midst. It won't go away.”

Feel familiar? Let's use this close-to-home challenge as a way to face and hold the tension, here and anywhere. Here's my truth.

The challenge in my Kentucky family of origin is an uncle. Since mom and dad have died, this uncle's wife divorced him. Then he left the hometown. He wandered homeless in western states for a few years, and then returned back to Kentucky. I am the primary family member who stayed in touch with him throughout those years of wandering. I was showing him compassion, attempting to help him make sense of his life and to find personal purpose. This ended up teaching me a lot about myself. I finally reached my limit when I realized he is unable to hear and receive my love.

He continued spiraling downward. In the past year, I made the hard decision to cut ties also; eliminating all communication. I was the last connection. He has been estranged from every other family member for about ten years. That estrangement was necessary for their personal safety, and to eliminate further harassment. Throughout his life, he has been emotionally unstable, and that led to abusive behavior. He has threatened the family. Once he even threatened Dad and my sister with a weapon. (That was a traumatic moment for Sis. It left emotional scars.) Uncle's behavior shows traits of narcissism, religious fanaticism, and belligerence; plus mental illness.

This might seem extreme to some of you. Sadly, it is not. Emotional tension stirs right in the midst of many families. We don't have to look at our nation's struggles to feel "out of sorts." Whether we speak it out loud or not, we ponder these questions, "What can we do?" "Where can we turn?"

The comparison to our nation's ills is strong. In both situations the problem has been seething for years. In our society's instance we are faced with "America's Shadow." In our own instance we are faced with "The Family's Shadow." When we deal with emotional messes, we must first do our shadow work: looking at our own baggage. Then comes the soul work, the deepening into heart's embrace.

I view it this way. We need to learn the practice of "feeling deeply without reacting." Instead of being carried by the choppy waters of emotion, learn to hold the tension. If our "boat of self" is feeling tossed about, we need to moor our boat to a steady shore. That "steadying place" affords us the opportunity to see through the choppy waters, so we can see more deeply. That practice of seeing brings qualities of calm. The calm opens a window into wisdom. Insights begin to surface from the Sea of Love. Love brings this clarity and vision. What I just described I call "the practice of discernment." It's a cyclical, labyrinthine path of inquiry and reception from which insights awaken. To do this takes devotion, perseverance, and humility. Devoted to what, you might ask? To faith in the Wisdom of Love.

This practice addresses the challenge before us. Life throws us into troubling waters choppy from emotion and suffering. We face these difficulties because our relationships inevitably shove us into the deep waters of emotion. Our task—in order to navigate with success, and maybe even with joy and zest—is to learn how to embrace it all. That's why we seek out a community of wisdom like this fellowship. We come here, I think, to heal our suffering, to grow our souls, and to catch a glimpse of hope. We want our hearts to lighten up, and light up.

My wisdom teacher, Dr. Robert Sardello, says, "Love is emotion held in Utter Stillness." Let's pause and reflect on that. "Love is emotion—all emotions—held in Utter Stillness."

Taoism has a name for that Utter Stillness. They call that place "Wu Ji." They say it is an "empty space," the "fertile void," between giving and receiving.

Can you hear that the "void," the Utter Stillness, is our "steadying place"? Odd isn't it? Hope does not come from being moored to a shore. Hope comes from being moored to nothing but an opening. We are *not* centered by grasping hold. We are centered by opening up, and staying open...through it all.

I think this “Wisdom of Opening” underlies the import of the “Namaste Practice.” Two people bow to the Sacredness of Life that dwells within each and joins them together in the sacred flow of communion. This is what I mean by the phrase “Companioning as Communion.” To dwell together in that opening.

My sister and I have that Bond of Communion. That bond was formed through our mother, who was a devout liberal Christian. In the past ten years, Sis and I needed to call upon that shared grounding of faith. A need brought about following the incident when our angry uncle pulled a weapon on Sis and Dad. Mother’s loving spirit and deep faith formed that bridge of caring, loving presence between my sister and me. That communion became our “Steadying Place.”

Mom died thirteen years ago, yet her spirit is with us every day. In a beautiful way we carry mom’s devout spirit of the loving heart. She left us that legacy. And we feel companioned by the Jesus Christ of mother’s faith—me in my UU way, Sis in her liberal Christian way. Mother is our “third other”: our shared passage to the Sacred.

Mother’s devotion to Christ’s Love transcends denominational understandings. She and I often talked about that. I feel that transcendence,... all human misunderstandings of Jesus notwithstanding. That Love—the Love lived by Christ—forms the True Bridge to the fullness of life.

Please hear me: I can just as easily call that bridge the “Wisdom of the Tao.” The language doesn’t matter. It’s the same: the open heart.

Yes, this is metaphorical, but it is also symbolic and real—real to felt experience. That “bridge” is not literal. It is heart’s passageway: of Calm, Utter Stillness. It awakens when your heart opens. It opens to all people who stay receptive. This is the Sustaining Presence of Life. Mother lived that faith. Sis and I moored ourselves to it, modeled by our mother. I offer you wisdom first given to me by my mother.

How can we be together in ways of healing and hope?

Together in our personal relations *and* in our country?

Learn how to hold the tension in Utter Stillness.

Have faith in the Open Heart, and practice that faith.

Namaste!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. How is my emotional past keeping me from being present here and now?
2. What role does silence play in my daily life and my relations?
3. How often in my life do I pause from “doing” in order to simply “be”?
4. What emotional dynamic is present and active in my relations at this time that could benefit from “holding the tension” and not being dragged in?
5. How can I see the Christ or the Buddha or the Goddess’s presence in the eyes of another person?