



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Letting Go, Making Connections”

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Centering Thoughts

A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you. Elbert Hubbard

*You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you.
You have to go to them sometimes.* A.A. Milne, ‘Winnie-the-Pooh’

Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit. Aristotle

Homily

Good Morning! So that was a rather unsatisfying ending, right? *[This homily was preceded by a folktale of how a frog and snake could not be friends.]* If you're anything like me, you were really hoping Frog and Snake would work it out and be friends in the end. And wouldn't it be lovely if all stories did end that way, with the protagonists overcoming obstacles and embracing one another in friendship? Unfortunately, I think most of us can think of a time when our own stories ended like Frog and Snake's. Instead of being friends with someone, we let something get in the way. Maybe our other friends didn't like the new person. Maybe our parents were worried like we just saw in the story. Maybe we were just scared to put ourselves out there, scared of what other people would think. Sometimes we let our fears or our defenses get in the way of forging new connections just because things don't look the way we thought they would.

There's still hope though. Frog and Snake may not have managed to make their friendships work, but we have plenty of stories where friendship does win out, and even makes huge accomplishments possible. Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger didn't start out as friends, but by the end, their friendship was what made it possible for them to defeat the dark lord. Even without the well-being of both the wizard and muggle worlds at stake, friendship is pretty important.

I'm going to ask everyone to close your eyes for a second. Think of a time recently when you were having a lot of fun. Think of a few of the activities that can make you smile, even when you're feeling down. Think back to your happiest memories. Now open your eyes. How many of those memories involved another person, involved a friend. Would those memories have been as

good without friends? Of course there are times when we need to be alone, but if we didn't have relationships and friendships, life would be pretty empty, right?

If you've been on the internet in the past year, you may have run across one of those stories about mismatched animal best friends. The elephant and dog, the cat and the squirrel, the rabbit and kittens, or the tiger and her piglets. I'm not sure about you guys, but I think if a tiger can have a group of piglets over for dinner without having them for dinner, there's got to be something about friendship that crosses the boundaries of how we're expected to act.

I think the tragedy of the story we just heard about Frog and Snake is that even though they knew they were friends, even though they had their own experience of hopping and slithering and collapsing in giggles at their own clumsiness, they still listened to the stereotypes about each other. Because they judged their new friend on the basis of someone else's expectations instead of on the character displayed through their own interactions, they missed out on so many more days playing and laughing and giggling.

The question at hand today is how to avoid ending up like the characters in our story, walking away from what could be a great relationship. And it isn't always easy. There are so many things that get in the way of connecting with new people. We can all think of someone who we don't know as well as we might want to. We can probably all look around this room and find someone we don't know as well as we might want to. And we should be asking ourselves why that is the case. We come here every week because we've found something in this community that draws us together, and yet we find ourselves running up against things that limit how far our community can go.

Every time we judge someone by what they look like or how we think someone else will react, we limit our connections. Every time we let our own fears, be they making ourselves vulnerable or the possibility of being chewed up, get in the way that puts us in the place of Frog and Snake. The only difference is that if we let our fears get the better of us we cheat ourselves out of even that one afternoon of laughter and fun.

I'll admit it can be hard to open ourselves up to new people. It can be difficult to put ourselves on the line. It's kind of ironic how difficult it can be to start a friendship, when, if you think about it, friendships make so many things so much easier. I'm not preaching from a pedestal on this point. You might not believe it, but I'm a bit of an introvert. I too have trouble making friends—I get nervous, I get scared, I have the same concerns introducing myself to new people as everybody.

I don't do well in new situations, surrounded by strangers. Sometimes I've reacted to my nervousness by closing off and not speaking to the people around me. Other times, I've made the leap and reached out beyond my own vulnerabilities. If you've been paying attention, you can probably guess which times have been more successful for me. In the past few years I've run across a lot of new situations, and if we think about it, most of us probably do run into opportunities all the time. I can say, without the shadow of a doubt that the things that I am most proud of in the past few years are the new friends I've made. By being willing to step outside my

comfort zone and extend myself, my life has been made richer, and I have connections literally across the globe. I have friends from Atlanta to Japan, Portland to Amsterdam, and Hawaii to Helsinki. And it's because I stepped outside what I was easy with, and didn't think about what people might think, and just said "hello."

I'm not suggesting that it is always easy, but I will argue that it is usually worth it step outside your comfort zone. Furthermore, I will challenge all of you: Look around this room—really, look around—and when we leave here, make a new connection, say hello to someone new. Find a friend you haven't met yet, and take the leap, bridge that gap, and give our story a better ending.

