



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Mutuality: The Heart of the Matter”

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Centering Thoughts:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. –Rumi
The field is alive and wants to help. –Stephen Gilligan

(Note: This sermon is grounded upon the wisdom of the “Tenets of Companionship” by Dr. Alan Wolfelt, which are posted after this sermon copy. Go there and read the tenets first.)

Sermon:

If you are anything like me, you have found that very few people actually know who you are. I mean down deep inside; the *real you*.

You are lucky if you even have a deep connection with your spouse, or with a close friend.

How can you? Are you honestly in touch with yourself?

Few of us are taught to be mindful of our feelings. Probably our parents held back many of their feelings. I wonder; could they actually be authentic with each other?

This evasion of speaking to authentic feeling is our conundrum. Being open to feeling seldom happens. I mean feeling that is present *underneath* our strong emotions. Most of us just don't navigate deeply. Instead we distract ourselves by society's noise: the consumerism and commercials; the cell phones, texts and emails; the news and politics; all playing havoc with our emotions. These battle for attention. And we keep our brains busy “doing, doing.” Who among us takes the quiet time to touch into the longings of your heart?

That's the conundrum. There are two sides to it: the side of sharing ourselves, of speaking from our deep—often hidden—feelings, our shame and suffering and sadness, for example.

The other side is receiving spoken feelings—the very act of listening. Feelings need to be heard deeply, caringly, for heart-to-heart communication to occur.

In the busyness of our lives, we give little value to *either* side: speaking from our deep feeling or hearing the deep feelings of others.

We are just not there in this world of ours. We have not given a priority to living from deep within.

This gift of deep listening and mutual presence has a name. It can be called “a place of receptive presence.” We enter there with the primary intention of being receptive to ourselves, to our inner experience, and to others and their inner experience.

Only in the past decade have I given this the priority in my life. Now I regularly attend a group that learns to relate with compassionate communication. Are some of you here familiar with the practice called “Nonviolent Communication”? Speaking *from* feeling and speaking *of our* feelings needs to take place. It needs conscious practice: speaking from our depths and hearing each other. I call that “sacred mutuality.”

It so seldom happens. Our usual conversations tell the tale—at home, at the office, in the neighborhood, and at church—with a spouse, with our children, with an elder, with your supervisor. Our habits are poor.

Here's an example of what could occur in the church foyer:

“Man, I just saw the movie ‘The Railway Man!’ It moved me to tears. That movie, about a WWII prisoner of war, touched my heart. You know what it brought up for m(e)?”

(interrupting) “Prisoners, yes! Of course! . . . that reminds me of the movie the ‘Bridge Over the River

Kwai.' You know... the one that starred Alec Guinness? That was the same railroad that...."

So what just happened in that exchange? (*pause for a response.*)

Yes, the feelings got bypassed: that man's grief, his sadness, and feelings for what that prisoner endured. The listening stopped. Ego jumped in . . . Or one-ups-man-ship. The man who interrupted did two things. He shifted the exchange to himself. And he shifted *away* from feelings.

He chose something he knows, something he was comfortable talking about. He moved the conversation to what I call "the balcony of aboutness." Totally in his head, divorced from the awareness of feeling.

It seems so hard for us to communicate authentic feeling . . . even to ourselves, let alone with someone else. It is even *more* difficult sustaining a deep conversation. There are few people that we are likely to encounter who feel and speak from the depths of their hearts.

What's the result? What's that leave us with? We are not seen for who we are. We are not truly heard. People don't know us. Whatever within you that hurts deep down remains your private pain.

Our struggles—our fears and pain, our losses and sadness, our self-doubts—as well as our deep gladness, do not have someone to receive, to care, to listen. That means we are not seen for who we truly are. We are seen only for our personalities and the roles we live. Relating remains shallow.

That's how I see it . . . for most of us; unless we *do* have a few precious people who can feel with us. That can make such a difference. Just one person who accepts you for who you are, warts and all. Someone who hears your heart's longings, and loves you *as* you are and *who* you are.

That person is your "soul companion." Our society lacks soul companions. Most of us feel that lack.

We *can* have that quality of companioning. If we act on that craving; if we tap into the "something that feels missing deep down."

Do you keep your feelings private and unspoken?

You can move beyond the distractions that television and hobbies cannot touch.

You can receive companionship that awakens those gnawing needs into caring conversation. I know this! You can, as feminist theologian Nelle Morton spoke of so often. You can be "heard into speech": the fullness of who you are—your struggles, doubts, and fears. Your gifts, strengths and successes, *and* your deep longings. You can be seen, heard and encouraged, if that is what you desire. Companioning can offer that; for you, and for others (Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*).

I have felt this longing and have acted on it. That need has been with me since adolescence. I first realized it at the dinner table when I was fifteen. There was my dad, who frightened me with his quick anger, my mother who was often emotionally scattered, my sister—a typical teen girl—and me. Everyone was talking. No one was listening. I noticed that as our dinnertime habit, and I thought, "I want to be heard. I want to be seen for who I really am, and for what I feel." That need has never left me. My needs are probably not much different from yours.

But it wasn't until my divorce from my first wife (39 years ago) that I did anything about it. Times of personal emotional turmoil often seem to be when we try things differently. Since then I have found different ways for "being heard, and for hearing others' deep needs." That has become my passion, and I want to share it with others whose hearts ache to attend to that "something that feels missing."

Since leaving settled ministry in year 2000, my ministry has focused largely on helping and healing the relational lives in our congregations. My calling—seventeen years ago now—was to bring the love that sustained our Universalist forbears back to the center of our congregational faith.

To make that love real in terms of hospitality and courtesy, where each person is offered unconditional regard; love as empathy and compassion, where each member and child feels that what is stirring within them is welcomed in the conversation; love as longings felt deeply; feelings and needs that yearn—even ache—to come alive; and love as friendship where shared interests form a bond of mutuality.

Of late I have chosen to focus on fostering safe, trusting, circles of relationship. That ministry has led me to developing a new approach. I call it "Companioning Circles."

But today I am not addressing the Circles, I am addressing the ache that calls those circles into being. I have a story that can bring this focus home for us . . . of what *can* be, if we value it enough.

Companioning another's feelings is best illustrated with an example that grounds us in an actual emotional setting. Any emotion could be chosen to demonstrate the healing effect of companioning: anxiety or grief or anger, for example. I have decided to address feelings of shame.

Shame is possibly the most toxic emotion that one can carry around, because it attacks one's very sense of

being. It may be the emotion we most fear.

And yet, we need shame as well as fear shame. Healthy shame “triggers our conscience (our innate moral sense),” says Dr. Robert Augustus Masters. “Unhealthy shame triggers our inner critic, which easily masquerades as our conscience.” But “shame kept in the dark keeps *us* in the dark” (Masters, *Emotional Intimacy*).

What is so debilitating about shame? It is the painfully self-conscious sense of being exposed as defective. Brene Brown says, “Shame derives its power from being unspeakable . . . it keeps us quiet” (Brown, *Daring Greatly*). That is, unless we “cut it to its knees” by naming it, by exposing it. To use her language, what we need is a place or a person who invites us to “dare greatly.” This is what companioning can offer. It awakens our courage.

It is my guess that each of us has experienced shame, especially during our early years. But those early emotions have a tendency to stay with us. My shame had much to do with my body, my stature, my size and small features. For example, my thin wrists and ankles. I learned, as a pre-adolescent boy, that “big and strong” is what boys and men are “supposed to be,” or to strive to be. I developed shame for being this small and not-very-strong boy. It took decades for my shame to dissipate and lose its power.

NB: *Here I step forward for a demo using a large blank Post-It sheet:*

“This blank tear-sheet symbolizes you at your birth.” (Then, I scrunch the paper slowly into a ball to demonstrate how the ego is formed with pain over the years. Then, at mid-life, we—many of us—tend to start opening ourselves [i.e., via the symbolic sheet] by turning inward. The paper unfolds and gets straightened. But the wrinkles remain as scars from the early formative years of pain: the “pull of the past.” This is a spontaneous, extemporaneous piece, that I do off-the-cuff. It touches congregants’ memories and feelings that have brought them pain over the years. It points to the persistence of pain, and the scars that are left, even if healed.)

So how can companioning, or a circle of trusted companions, help us “dare greatly”? How can companioning serve as a supportive witness to our struggles with debilitating emotions? I want to share a story from my years in interim ministry; a story in which I will give no names, but will share the feelings and setting. A troubled colleague was heard deeply by those she trusted. This was, of course, a confidential and caring circle of friends.

The one colleague, a mature, experienced woman minister, chose a few of us to be her confidants. But it was not an “intentional support group.” This happened rather spontaneously.

She felt the safety of the setting. We were present with her in very much the ways that Dr. Wolfelt describes in the “litany of companioning” that we recited earlier. None of us were there to “fix, save, advise, or set her straight.”

We were engaged in some rather personal sharing—all of us—when she, somewhat diffidently ventured a few hesitant words of personal pain. “I, I, I don’t know how to say this, but I’ve been carrying within me something that I’m ashamed of. I have not mentioned it to my husband or anyone, and I’m not sure I can speak it here. But somehow I need to get beyond this blocked feeling that keeps pulling at my heart.”

One fellow in our small circle seemed to hear her pain immediately, and even feel her pain, more strongly than the others of us. He just looked at her from across the circle and said something like, “I feel you wanting to say something, but you just don’t know how to get it out.” He continued to look into her eyes, conveying to all of us just by that gesture, that he had somehow entered into her depths of feeling.

Silence became a partner in our circle as his eyes and heart held her with his caring presence, completely devoted to whatever she needed. His presence invited her feelings into her chest. Her eyes moistened.

She did not start speaking. There was quite a bit of silence as we all sat present with the unvoiced pain. Then she looked up at him with gratitude, and slowly a gentle smile formed on her face. Her eyes were fixed on his.

There was silence for a few more minutes as we relaxed into the shift in feeling. We sat there sensing grace stirring in our midst.

Another one in the group gestured the blessedness of the moment by lighting a candle. Then, after more silence, and after she lifted her head with a smile, someone said, “Amen.”

This is the precious quality of presence that we can cultivate in our relating. It takes feelings of reverence, devoting ourselves to the subtleties within our bodies, and in our hearts. Dear ones, we need to hold the space for subtleties of deep feeling to have a voice.

I’m drawn to saying, “Nothing is more important.”

Our hearts long for the pregnant silence of caring companions who “hear us into speech.”

What does your heart ache to say? Treasure that pain. It harbors momentum . . . that longs to come out.
Companion your heart.
Companion each other.
Amen.

Following are the “Tenets of Companionship” by Dr. Alan Wolfelt (Permission to use the tenets was obtained from Dr. Wolfelt.). You may learn more about Dr. Wolfelt and the Center for Loss and Life Transitions at <https://www.centerforloss.com/>.

Tenets of Companionship

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Companionship is about honoring the spirit;
it is not about focusing on the intellect.

Companionship is about curiosity;
it is not about expertise.

Companionship is about learning from others;
it is not about teaching them.

Companionship is about walking alongside;
it is not about leading or being led.

Companionship is about being still;
it is not about frantic movement forward.

Companionship is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence;
it is not about filling every painful moment with talk.

Companionship is about listening with the heart;
it is not about analyzing with the head.

Companionship is about bearing witness to the struggles of others;
it is not about judging or directing those struggles.

Companionship is about being present to another person’s pain;
it is not about taking away or relieving the pain.

Companionship is about respecting disorder and confusion;
it is not about imposing order and logic.

Companionship is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being;
it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Can you be present with another person if you stay in your own thoughts? Notice and be with that challenge.
2. How do you “enter” another person when you are in dialogue? Does this relate to empathy for you?
3. What is the role of silence in mutuality? Notice how this relates to #1, above.