



Communities of Resilience

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Our Soul Matters materials for March focus on the theme of resilience. Last week we considered personal resilience, this week, communal resilience.

The materials explain:

When it comes to resilience, our most saving message has always been, "You can do it and you do not have to do it on your own!" There is a common metaphor about resilience; the one about being a tree that is willing to lean and bend rather than hold tight in place and break. We UUs take a different approach to this strategy of leaning. Yes, be willing to lean back and forth, we say. But most importantly, be willing to lean in –and on– each other! It is a reminder that resilience does have a lot to do with what is inside us, but it has even more to do with what is between us. The true path of resilience is the path of connection.

In these odd and unsettling times it is good to remember that resilience has even more to do with "what is between us," what is within our communities, including this congregation, a very special place here in Cincinnati. I proudly married same sex couples for free after the historic Supreme Court ruling this past June, and in a month we are set to hang a Black Lives Matter banner on the outside of our building. So we remember what is between us in a larger communal sense. We also remember what is between us within these walls as we share Valentines Breakfast with adults and children, and shower our members struggling with loss with cards, visits, and exceptional memorial services.

We have seen cracks in how America organizes as of late. Congregations (mainstream, UU, mega-churches, and evangelical) as well as non-profits across America are challenged to find and court members and finances. Our American ideas of civic engagement are changing. But please don't mistake cracks or changing for dying. The human soul eternally yearns for social meaning and gathering places of relevance, solace, and meaning making.

I recently met a young couple who told me that they had experimented with several small, local house churches, but none of them seemed to work, so they were interested in us. I get this. People don't want stodgy and dusty institutions, but they still yearn to gather, to learn, to meet people, to give back, to be inspired by beauty and mission, our mission. And, it is hard to start a new institution, really, really, really hard.

There is, and always will be a place for First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati and our unique and saving message of religious liberalism, we just need to adapt. Lest you think this is NOT possible, let me remind you of our congregational history. We survived multiple wars, including a congregational split after the Civil War, a Depression and more recently a Recession. We survived the ethnic nationalism of WWI (that harmed this congregation and Cincinnati with anti-German sentiment), as well as the riots of 1968 which burnt portions of our neighborhood, and divided members on issues of racial equity.

We survived several misconducting ministers, such as Reverend Thayer, who was a bully in his 30 years of ministry. We survived Reverend Malik, who after 20 years decided to have an affair with a member of the choir and subsequently left in 1939. We have adapted to automobiles, furnaces (we were initially heated with coal), a changing neighborhood, telephones, air-conditioning, and the Internet. This congregation knows how to adapt!

Please don't believe everything you hear in the news. Bad news is not the only thing out there. It matters what you believe. If you believe we can adapt, we will adapt. If you don't we will struggle more than necessary. If we lean on one another, honoring our connections, we will figure this out. We might even have fun. In fact, I guarantee we will have fun. There are miracles abounding around us. We just have to find them.

Look, there is a ton of hand wringing about the candidacy of Donald Trump, the Presidency of Barack Obama, police brutality in African American communities, immigration, and the war in the Middle East. As a society we have devolved into negative thinking, and if you remember the sermon from last week, negative thinking unravels resilience. We all, individuals and communities, need to maintain a positivity ratio, more positive than negative thoughts. In another lesson from last week, we need realistic optimism, not blinders or denial, but realistic optimism. We also need to "reject rejection."

So I look at it another way, what we know is changing. As T. S. Eliot tells us "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."

So here is what I see in the United States, the voice of dying middle class America giving its finger to the political parties that abandoned it, and the real and present underbelly of racial fear and hatred in the United States. I don't know about you, but frankly, I prefer to be honest about where I stand. Where the media sees chaos, I see a clear message. The end is where we start from. We have work to do on economic and racial equality for our shared community - that is the United States, Ohio, Cincinnati, and in our work places, homes, and neighborhoods. So let's get crackin'!

Another lesson on resilience from last week was the important of building a support

system, like this very beloved community. If I sat at home every Sunday and read the paper and listened to the radio I would be discouraged, I might even feel despair.

But in community with like-minded people I see hope, and positive action. Yesterday many of us walked in support of immigrant rights. We ain't buildin' no stinkin' wall! Some of you are registering voters at Shiloh Food pantry. Two weeks ago we housed homeless families. When Marlene Moore became so ill, we reached out to her and her daughter, Anna and Anna's partner, Molly. When we needed a laugh, Meredith, our Director of Family Programming bought us red noses. When we needed to think about how to fund our mission in the coming year, various lay members created a strategy for our canvass season and recruited people to help. When we needed a good time had by all, you Hootenanied it up! Perhaps you missed the obvious, so let me clarify it for us, we have been building community and living our restorative message of liberal religion, regardless of rhetoric.

It matters what we believe. This is one of the recurring messages in Rebecca Solnit's book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*. Her book profiles 5 major disasters from the last century, including Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Solnit's thesis is unique, she notes how communities rise to the occasion during the majority of disasters, not every member of the community, but multiple members within the community, and the ability of these people to rise in a collective force makes all the difference and creates a beloved community in the midst of chaos.

Solnit notes several destructive factors in the catastrophic events that followed Hurricane Katrina, the first being "elite panic." There really is a definition and describable phenomena known as "elite panic," fear of "social disorder, fear of poor, minorities, and immigrants; obsessions with looting and property crime, willingness to resort to deadly force, and actions taken on the basis of rumor" but those in power. Solnit points to the Chief of Police and Mayor of the City, both African Americans, who spread untrue rumors about violence and chaos in the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Apparently it was not as murderous and violent in the New Orleans Superdome as we were all initially told. The people who died there were the young, ill, elderly and infirm, who did not receive food, water, or adequate care. The vast majority of the people who died in the Superdome did not die at the hands of murderous gangs, but of a negligent system. In fact New Orleans never had an evacuation plan for its many residents in nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons. These are some of the very individuals who suffered the most, the poorest, frailest, and most vulnerable.

I know you will remember the "looting" that took place after the Hurricane and in the week before relief arrived. The City's overall concern about property (elite panic) was higher than its concerns about humans. In the months following Hurricane Katrina we had reasons to reconsider whether "looting" was really survival foraging. Solnit explains "New Orleans had long been a high-crime city, but the mythic city of monsters the media and authorities invented in the wake of Katrina never existed, except in their imagination. That belief ravaged the lives of tens of thousands of the most vulnerable." It matters what we believe.

Solnit tells tales of the police and National Guard refusing to let people pass or go or

leave at gun point because they were so afraid of social control. People died due to this legally enforced lockdown.

Of course, not every officer acted in this way. Some were heroic, and other people rose to the occasion. Local residents and out-of-towners risked their lives, navigating and entering a flooded city, to rescue strangers trapped on rooftops, in attics, on overpasses, evacuating out the most frail, and bringing food and water to those who remained. Unexpected communities of solidarity arose as individuals, formerly unknown to one another, spent time trapped on overpasses, or passed through flooded streets to safety. In the aftermath, thousands of well-intentioned, altruistic people poured into the city to bring comfort and help rebuild. Solnit notes that congregations were some of the greatest contributors, especially Catholic Charities and the Methodist Church.

Solnit notes that in the midst of a disaster people realize that life is "situated in the here and now, and, many inessentials" area pared away. Suddenly your car repair bill and the fight you are having with your brother don't seem to matter in the face of survival. She explains

Disasters are, most basically, terrible, tragic, grievous, and no matter what positive side effects and possibilities they produce, they are not to be desired. But by the same measure, those side effects should not be ignored because they arise amid devastation. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from the wreckage, carnage, and ashes . . . Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere . . . The positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding.

Solnit is not hoping for disasters, but in her research, she could not help but notice that in every disaster she would run into people who both expressed rage and despair, and people who were filled with joy and hope by the formation of community that saved, helped, and redeemed them from loss. Sometimes one person would express the same sentiment.

She writes that disasters demonstrate that

"The factors determining whether you will live or die are the health of your immediate community and the justness of your society. [AND] We need ties, but they along with purposefulness, immediacy, and agency also give us joy - the startling, sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors."

Solnit concludes that humans both yearn for and have the potential to live in deeper, more purposeful and meaningful community and that our current systems that promote things like elite panic, make this impossible. Her book counsels each of us to take a hard look at our unnecessary prejudices against our neighbors because "how you behave [during a crisis] depends on whether you think your neighbors or fellow citizens are a greater threat than the havoc wrought by a disaster or a greater good than the property in houses and stores around you."

I do wonder about Solnit's observation that religious communities were most likely to

heed the long term call for help in New Orleans. I propose this is because people of faith, even Unitarian Universalist faith, gather in the first place because we believe in our human potential and the greater good, so we are more able to offer this in times of need. Given the cracks in our society, this is of course a gift that we offer and a reason for realistic optimism.

The Soul Matters material tells us "that resilience does have a lot to do with what is inside us, but it has even more to do with what is between us. The true path of resilience is the path of connection." If you remember the sermon on personal resilience from last week, you will also remember I told you that an appreciation of little things and gratitude are markers of resilience. The glass can be half empty or half full. How do you see it?

In the spirit of community resilience, I invite you to reflect a minute and consider the little things you appreciate and what makes you grateful, in your life, at home, during work, at church. Consider, and then I invite you to share.

{SHARE}

Resilience is within and between us. May it always be so.