

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Holy Friends
Rev. Sandra Fees
August 12, 2007



Friendship is on the decline in America. We have been hearing about our waning social ties for several years. It is a trend popularly known as “bowling alone,” named for the 2000 book by Robert Putnam.

Our circle of confidantes has shrunk from about 3 to 2 individuals. That means for the average person, there are two other people who they can talk to about things that matter deeply to them.

But what I find more troubling is that one in four of us has no trusted friend at all. That means a lot of people are longing for human connection and for a deeper experience with another human being. A lot of people are finding it difficult if not impossible to make that happen.

I experienced such a time in my life. Through most of my early life, I found it easy to make friends. It seemed to come naturally.

In school and then college, there seemed ready companions who shared my love for learning and creative pursuits. At work, there were people who shared my professional interests and work ethic.

Then life changed, as it does. I moved back from New Jersey to Central Pennsylvania, my home state. I knew no one except my parents. Though I had grown up in the area, I no longer had childhood friends. I knew I needed to make new friends. I needed people in my life.

I ended up doing what all the literature says to do. I joined activities I loved. In some cases, I took it as an opportunity to learn something new. I joined writer’s groups, a hiking club, the cross country ski club, and others. I joined a health club.

I soon discovered just how much work it can be to make new friends. It took a bit of time and courage. Courage, because it’s a bit risky to reach out to other people who may reject us. And time, because trust typically takes some time to develop.

I eventually made some professional connections locally. One of my clients ended up introducing me to a friend of hers who became a good friend of mine too. Sounds a bit like dating, doesn’t it? I think it is – with all the same excitement and letdowns. In addition to being fixed up with a friend, I made a few friends on my own through hiking and going to the gym.

Friends like these enrich life. They are people we can go to the movies with or invite over for dinner. They make us laugh. They help us when we are ill or in need. They are part of the fabric of our daily lives.

When asked about our friends, most of us are likely to mention these personal friendships. But there is another kind of friendship that is just as important in our lives. When I was looking for friendship, I was also looking for this kind of relationship. It is what we find here in church, or hope to find. It is the community of friends on the spiritual path.

Holy Friends (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

I don't mean to suggest that the individuals in a community of friends are necessarily more spiritual than other friends in our lives. The distinction is that they are part of a community and that that community gathers specifically because they share the same interest in growing spiritually. They have the same intention.

Why do we need help from a community of friends? We need help because the spiritual path is a difficult one. We need people who make a commitment to walk with us on the spiritual journey because of its great challenges – whether we are confronting addiction, greed, death or illness, selfishness, or anger, or the broad philosophic questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

The community of friends stands by one another through the joys and trials in life. They act together to support each other in living out their moral and ethical values.

The community of friends can teach us how to open ourselves to the Source of all life. Through the rituals, practices, and teachings of the gathered community, we can enter into a sacred conversation with the most significant moments and experiences in our lives.

In other words, spiritual friendship can help to bring us closer to God, to each other, and to ourselves. Essentially, the community of friends offers a spiritual support system (“Sangha,” Gehlek Rimpoche, in Parabola).

That's why friendship forms a central theme in all the world's religions. Throughout the ages, prophets and religious leaders in various traditions have taught the value of a community of spiritual friends.

Some religions call it universal or *agape* love because it is based on a love that extends to all human beings. The relationship relies on the bond of common humanity and common divinity rather than on the personal affection and preference we might have for one person over another. (“The Spirit of Agitation and the Spirit of Brotherhood,” Hazrat Inayat Khan, in Parabola).

It is no accident, for example, that the official name for the Quakers includes the word “friends.” Founder George Fox named the Religious Society of Friends for the principle that “the life of the Spirit is not for the isolated individual.” Instead, it is based on a spirit of solidarity with other people.

Fox recognized the presence of the divine in each person, and called it the “inner light.” A life of friendship, he believed, was built on the recognition of “God in every person” (“Turning to the Inner Light,” Frank Purcell, in Parabola).

This is the higher calling of friendship – to recognize the divine in others. Because when we befriend each other we also befriend God.

The Quaker spirit of solidarity is reflected in their style of worship. Gathered in silence, they await the spirit to move one among them to speak. In this way, they minister to one another.

Holy Friends (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

I had a chance to attend Quaker Meeting several times this summer. I know some of you attended the Quaker service at Maiden Creek.

I attended Quaker services for the five days I spent at Pendle Hill, an intentional Quaker community and retreat center, near Philadelphia. The Pendle Hill community consists of staff people who live on the grounds, year-long residents, day students, and those taking extended programs and workshops. About 20 of us gathered in the meeting room for worship each morning.

During one meeting, a woman shared the story of her pregnant daughter who was on her way home from Boston to New York and on a tight deadline to get back to a toddler at home. She must have been tired and ended up catching a train going in the exact wrong direction. Through some juggling and what we might call one of life's mysterious little miracles, she was able to get off the wrong train going in the wrong direction and onto another going in the right direction. What made the incident so remarkable was that there was no scheduled stop where they let her off one train and onto another.

Another day, a woman who lives and works at Pendle Hill talked about the daily challenges of living in community. The night before, she had gone to the freezer for something and when she opened the door, ice cubes came tumbling out. She said she became irritated when she realized that the ice container was gone and that someone must have taken it.

Who would do such a thing, she wondered. As she reflected on this, she said she began to shift her thinking. Rather than wondering, who would do such a thing, she began to wonder, how often have I, metaphorically speaking, left another member of the community without an ice container to catch life's ice cubes. How often have I done such a thing, she asked herself.

In both examples, we who were gathered were hearing stories of what mattered deeply to these two women. And it turns out both their stories have to do with friendship. In the first, strangers went out of their way to befriend a traveler in need. They went so far as to make an unscheduled stop. In the second case, a woman questioned the meaning of spiritual friendship in the small moments of daily life in community.

In the Buddhist tradition, the community of friends on the spiritual path is called the sangha. Gehlek Rimpoche, a lama educated in Tibetan Buddhism, considers the sangha one of "Buddha's best gifts." Rimpoche says,

In almost every endeavor we face, when we have help from our friends, the work is lighter and the experience is richer and more meaningful. Friends help us manage the loneliness we face. They give us much-needed support for the many trials we must go through in our lives. ... Sangha is a community of friends that have the same interests, friends that really like to help themselves and help each other.

The spiritual goal of the sangha is to help people better themselves and develop their own character. Good sangha members help each other, guide each other, and lead each other. The sangha is a community of "friends you can rely on with your life." (Rimpoche)

Holy Friends (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

In the mystical tradition of the Sufis, friendship is “the spirit of brotherhood [and sisterhood.]” This means “to love one another, to be kind, to be sincere, and to serve one another.” The Sufi movement practices this philosophy by striving to live in harmony with people of different races, cultures, and faiths. The goal is to create greater understanding and sympathy among these different groups.

In his essay Sufi teacher, Hazrat Inayat Khan, says,

...behind all this world of various names and forms there is one life, there is one spirit. This spirit which is the soul of all beings is attracted towards unity, and it is the absence of this spirit of unity which keeps the world unhappy. ... Nothing in the world is a greater healing power, a greater remedy, a greater happiness, than to be conscious of brotherhood [and sisterhood] and to be able to tie that feeling to one's child, [teacher,] neighbor, and friend.

We Unitarian Universalists have our own brand of friendship. Our principles point to some of the qualities of the UU community of friends. We affirm the worth and dignity of each person. We practice religious tolerance. Compassion and justice are central to our values. We offer ourselves to each other and the world in love, service, and kindness.

We gather in community as friends seeking to be accepted as we are and to learn to accept others as they are, even as we encourage and challenge each other to grow spiritually. We practice forgiveness of one another even as we find we sometimes need to call each other back into right relationship. As a community of friends, we are willing to risk speaking hard truths to each other out of love.

We practice our special brand of friendship when we make our presence and voices known on issues that matter to us. We did this in July when we arrived at the Peace Parade one day and the Pride Fest the next sporting our UU Berks t-shirts and bringing our religious message of love, hope, and inclusion to the public square.

We practice our special brand of friendship in our small circle groups. In these intimate circles of 10 or so individuals, everyone has an opportunity to share what matters most to them in their lives. And they are assured that the rest of the group will listen sincerely and deeply to what they have to share.

In a world that is too often inhospitable, that promotes superficiality rather than deep spirituality, and fails to attend to the stirrings of our hearts, a community of friends is one of life's great gifts.

We learn what it means to be a community of friends and to serve as holy companions on the spiritual journey. Such friendship can transform us and the world. The companionship of holy friends can help make our lives and the lives of others whole.

May it be so. Amen.

Holy Friends (cont'd.)
Rev. Sandra Fees