

"Water Communion Sunday"
An All Ages Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of
Wayne County, Ohio
August 25, 2019
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Inez Bird, Worship Associate

[The Morning Reading is from, *Tribe – On Homecoming and Belonging*, by Sebastian Junger]

Homily "On Community and Belonging" (Rev. Jennie)

My inspiration for this morning's worship service was the very moving true story that Inez Bird read for us as this morning's reading. It's from the book, *Tribe – On Homecoming and Belonging*, by Sebastian Junger. It highlights for us some truths that need to be reawakened in our hearts-- that people need help and caring from others and that we have an inner need and desire to provide help and caring to others. In short, we need one another to survive.

When people are asked what the most important thing is to them about their Unitarian Universalist congregation, many of them answer, "Community-- It is the sense of community, the support and care and sense of belonging." And many people also say of Water Communion Sunday that it isn't really about water. It's about community-- It's about all of us coming back together after having been scattered in different places over the summer. It's about the sense of love and belonging that we feel when we are together. And so "community" can be an overused word-- even a "watered down" word, if you will. But over the summer, as I was thinking ahead to this worship service, the one when you would be back together again caringly, and energetically starting up so many important and joyful events for the year ahead, I kept feeling that "community" is not a superficial thing at all. Community is actually something that human beings need for our very well-being-- We need one another to stay alive and healthy, physically, mentally, and spiritually. And so this opportunity to come together, for our Water Communion Sunday, and for this congregation that you love so dearly, is a precious thing. And that opportunity for community, in its most profound sense, is something that is missing in our modern society in the United States.

Two authors who have reached the same conclusion are Sebastian Junger, in his book, *Tribe*, and also Andrew Lawler, in his book, *The Secret Token – Myth, Obsession, and the Search for the Lost Colony of Roanoke*. These are both books that I will explore in more depth in future Sundays. I'll just begin to touch on their thought-provoking themes this morning. And I would love it if you would explore the themes in these books, too, in the coming months. It would make for very rich exploration if, together, we could discuss the questions of: What is that sense of community that we need to receive from others and feel moved to provide for others? And why is it missing in most of the settings of contemporary society today? And what can we in this congregation do to create a life-giving sense of community, for ourselves, and for the people who come to us seeking it?

Sebastian Junger, in his book, *Tribe*, gives us so many helpful insights in this regard. Among them are:

"[H]uman beings need three basic things in order to be content: they need to feel competent at what they do; they need to feel authentic in their lives; and they need to feel connected to others. These values are considered 'intrinsic' to human happiness and far outweigh 'extrinsic' values such as beauty, money, and status."

And he writes in depth about how, in the wake of a natural disaster, people stop competing for material needs, wealth, and status and, instead, have been found to act virtuously, setting aside self-interest in favor of the larger good of the community. And this was found to be the case in England in the Blitz during World War II. And Mr. Junger states that, when looking back, many people who have survived a disaster, or time of war, remember that time more fondly than they do a wedding or tropical vacation. Mr. Junger also addresses the experience of veterans in our nation. When they have returned from war, they miss the collective sense of community and sacrifice for a common higher purpose that they experienced with their unit. Mr. Junger states that treating veterans as victims, or setting them apart as having some special status distinct from those who did not serve our country is not a balm for what ails them. What is needed is for their compatriots to provide for them a sense of family, community, and "shared public meaning." Those are the elements that lead to healing from the trauma of war. My Junger writes:

"The earliest and most basic definition of community -of tribe- would be the group of people that you would both help feed and help defend. A society that doesn't offer its members the chance to act selflessly in these ways isn't a society in any tribal sense of the word; it's just a political entity that, lacking enemies, will probably fall apart on its own."

The most intriguing insight, for me, in Mr. Junger's book, has to do with the relations between the first peoples who inhabited what has become the United States: the Native Americans and the Elizabethans. We now know that the Native Americans' way of life --a tribal way of life-- was appealing and sustaining to the English settlers. And we now know that, regarding the reverse-- not so appealing. Mr. Junger quotes Benjamin Franklin as having written to a friend that Indian children who were being brought up within the English culture would return to their Indian tribe the first chance they got. And Mr. Junger writes that:

"a surprising number of Americans -mostly men- wound up joining Indian society rather than staying in their own. They emulated Indians, married them, were adopted by them, and on some occasions even fought alongside them. And the opposite almost never happened: Indians almost never ran away to join white society."

That insight led me to the book by Andrew Lawler called, *The Secret Token*, about the 115 Elizabethan men, women, and children who, in 1587, vanished from Roanoke Island, off the coast of North Carolina. This is definitely a book I will return to on a future Sunday. It provides so many insights about race relations over the course of our nation's history, in ways that can inform current events. But to summarize, the Roanoke settlers had basically been abandoned by their leader, John White. Due to extraordinary events, including wars, storms, and political upheaval, he could not get back to them for over two years. Historians did not know whether they had been invaded by the Croatoan Indians, or had moved to a location fifty miles inland. Most scholars now conclude that the Roanoke settlers went to the nearby island, called Croatoan. In desperate need of food, shelter, medicinal care, and even company, they would have asked the natives for help. We now surmise that they received help. I imagine them receiving genuine hospitality. And those English settlers assimilated with the Indians.

In an interview on Book TV on CSPAN 2, Mr. Lawler said:

"So I go back to the story of Roanoke. The story of a people from another country arriving on the shores of a strange land that was populated by people of another culture for a long time. And in the beginning they really did work together, and each had something the other wanted. You have corn and we have metal. That's great! Let's trade! But the power of the story is that we didn't have to begin in a cycle of violence that continued. In fact, it didn't begin as a cycle of violence. It began as two cultures that could have learned to live with one another. Now that might sound-- You might say that I'm horribly unrealistic. But I really think that these people who arrived on the shores of Roanoke Island, once

they were abandoned, had to come to terms with the limits of who they were and how they needed help, in the practicality of: 'I'm hungry. I'll learn Algonquian-- Sure.' So I think there is a lot of hope in understanding that, when people are pushed, they can get along with others and learn how to take the best out of another culture to make it part of themselves. And isn't that what we do? And isn't that what we are proud of as Americans? --that we [incorporate] things from different parts of the world and make them ours? And I think that that's a strength, and I think that that began at Roanoke. And I would like to see us recover that sense in this country."

May our congregation be a model of the radical hospitality our nation so desperately needs. [Let us sing.]

*Closing Hymn #1021 Lean on Me

*Parting Words [William F. Schulz]: (Rev. Jennie)

"This is the mission of our faith: to teach the fragile art of hospitality; to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness; and to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands."

Extinguishing the Chalice
Postlude