

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

### **12.8.13 Sermon: “Encountering Disappointment”**

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

The December holidays feel like a self-examination. It takes till December, however, for me to discover the status of my holiday spirit. I can't predict how I'm going to feel. Sometimes I'm really excited and full of anticipation. That was especially true when our son was little. Christmas experienced through a child's eyes is so magical. This year I'm kind of neutral to slightly positive. Not having any snow and warmer weather makes it less real that we're approaching the shortest day of the year. And a few times, I've gritted my teeth and just plod on through till Christmas morning just wanting to be done with it. Those years felt very uncomfortable as the celebrations cranked up and I wasn't feeling much connection to the joy and happiness I'm supposed to be feeling.

That sense of disconnection can be even larger if there has been a major loss in the past year. The death of a loved one weighs heavily on the heart as others are making merry. There are so many little reminders of that person's absence that come up unexpectedly. Then a wave of grief hits, tears flow and an inner ache pulls one out of the present into memory, and into an intense longing for what can no longer be.

There are other losses that gnaw at the heart this time of year. Those who are new in this area and not able to return to be with friends and family may be lamenting the separation. For some this may be the first year after a relationship break-up. There may be family members newly moved away who will be celebrating the holidays alone or with others. Children may not be coming home for the holidays. There is a significant emotional price we pay for our transient and mobile lifestyles.

Some may be struggling with employment or lack of employment. Money may be tighter making the gifts we'd like to give unaffordable. It doesn't feel very good to cut back this time of year when the impulse is to splurge.

Unbidden, we find ourselves stuck in an emotional trough of disconnection.

Others of us may have an ongoing experience of disconnection that troubles our lives. I was listening to a podcast recently describing the challenges children have when their parents have unhappy marriages and go through bitter divorces. When these children grow up, frequently they struggle in forming intimate relationships, often with significant trust and abandonment issues. If they marry at all, it is often much later in life, postponing their child bearing years.

Another common source of disconnection in families are the taboo dinner table conversation topics at Thanksgiving: politics and religion. I'm amazed at how quickly I can want to disconnect from someone I've recently met when we start disagreeing about politics and religion. I've had those conversations on airplanes. The fellow sitting next to me will ask what I do for a living. If I mention I'm a minister, he'll ask what denomination. Then he'll ask me what Unitarian Universalists believe. I'll do a credible job explaining our faith and its value as a

religious path. The other person will nod and and smile. When I finish, he will ask, “Well all that is interesting, but is Jesus Christ your personal savior?” And I’ll know that this conversation isn’t going anywhere. The disconnect happens when I hear the word “savior” because I know he is on a way different religious journey than I’m on.

But as bad as disconnecting around religion and politics is, the hostile feelings that come up around money are deep sources of disconnection. Loving families can be ripped apart by ill will generated by how an inheritance is distributed when a parent or grandparent dies. Friendships can end quickly when money is loaned and not repaid. It is one reason I never loan people money. I give money away when I can and it is asked for. If they want to give me some back that would be very pleasant. Pleasant but not expected.

The feeling of disconnection can also happen in small ways. Small ways that can still feel disproportionate to the situation. That happened to me recently and I’d like to describe the situation.

Last January I attended a Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Convocation in Florida. The focus for my fifteen hours of class time was a presentation by the co-minister at First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York, the Rev. Scott Tayler. The theme for his presentation was “Doing More with Less.” Tayler is an organizational genius. He has studied all the successful church models and distilled their ideas, with his own innovations added, into some great programs in that congregation. I’ve translated one of them into a new program for our congregation called Meaning Matters that is going very well so far this year.

As the class ended, several of the participants informally started talking about meeting to follow up on what we had learned and brainstorm implementation strategies. One of the ministers offered his cabin in the Adirondacks as a place to gather, so six of us agreed to meet there in June. We had a wonderful meeting for a couple of days, did a lot of talking and came up with some grand plans.

The way we realized we could “do more with less” effort was through sharing materials with each other. What makes sermons and adult programs great are the materials and resources we have from which to prepare them. This is some of the hardest work of my week, searching for that great illustration or story that will inspire you and motivate you. If we could share with each other our great finds by focusing our efforts on a shared theme for the month, we would all benefit. We chose themes and set up resource sharing locations in the cloud with excitement and anticipation.

So when September came, I was distressed that the contributions and material didn’t appear the way I had expected. I put up what I was working on but the response was lack luster. Two of our group didn’t post anything at all that first month.

Now, I know how hard ministry is, how many distractions there are. I know how best laid plans do not come to fruition as a memorial service or a congregational crisis intervene. Yet, the absence of any emails from those two bothered me. I was afraid I’d be going to the extra effort of sharing all my material and getting little I could use back. The urge to withdraw, reject and

disconnect came up.

This is a familiar experience, I might add, in congregational life too. The mismatch of expectations and results creates a lot of stress. We are all working together to create this community and sometimes people don't follow through on their commitments. They are less friendly and kind than we'd like. Events don't turn out to be as satisfying or enjoyable as we'd hoped. Each Wednesday, Matt, Leah and I review the previous Sunday services looking for ways to improve what we do. Your hard working staff troubleshoots all the unexpected problems that come up so your expectations are met as often as we can.

And still there are moments of disconnect, many that we have no control over.

I listened to a very interesting sermon recently by a British minister named Stephen Matthew describing those kinds of disconnections that happen in his church. He pointed out that people sometimes get disaffected from his congregation and its programs. I was interested to hear how he understood what was going on and what his solution was. He saw the movement away from his church as people participating in sin. If his members were disaffected and hadn't talked to him or his staff, if they got critical and judgmental, they were moving away from God. They were allowing themselves to become alienated.

I enjoy listening to these kind of traditional religious messages because sometimes they have practical value that is independent of their theological perspective. I think he has a part of the truth when he points to our participation in the process of disconnection and alienation. And we know it emotionally.

When we participate in disconnection and alienation, it leads to unhappiness, inner turmoil, and unrest and can lead to meaninglessness and dehumanization. But when we participate in connection and experience unity, it leads to happiness, calm, and peace, and can lead to meaning, a greater sense of humanity and fulfillment. One direction feels good, the other bad.

Whether by recognition or by feeling, becoming aware of the disconnection and sense of alienation moves us out of reactivity. In Buddhism, this is called a moment of mindfulness. There is a recognition of the mental and emotional processes that are happening inside us. It is the difference between being absorbed in an experience and stepping outside it and seeing it as a mental and emotional process. It is like the moment in a movie theater when someone coughs and you are jerked out of the trance and recognize that you are in the audience and not part of the movie.

When we are in this mindful state, we have the freedom to evaluate the situation and make a choice. In the recognition of being disconnected, there is space in the mind to know that what we are doing may not be healthy or wholesome. The choice is ours to remain disconnected and alienated or to renounce that path and choose another one to reconnect and seek unity. Choose a path that potentially leads toward reconciliation.

That moment of mindfulness happened for me first when one of the missing participants in our group sent an email apologizing for not posting because of the overwhelming success he had had

signing up people for his small groups. He had been struggling to train more facilitators and keep up with that success. Then the second missing person posted an email to the group apologizing as well. He had been leading an international trip and all of his time and attention had gone into that project. Both reiterated their commitment to our common experiment.

Reading those emails, I became mindful of my resentful feelings just below the surface of my awareness. I regretted that I'd allowed those feelings to take root in me and not checking with them to see what was going on. I rejoiced to renounce that resentful attitude and reconnect with both of them. This joint project may sink or swim in the future, but I don't want that success or failure to disconnect me from these beloved colleagues.

As Anne Lamott puts it, in her book, *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*, Alone we are doomed. Yes, people are impossible, often damaged, prickly and set in their ways. It may be comfortable to be invisible, disconnected, and intoxicated with our superior thoughts but it isn't where we discover hope. Only together do we come through unsurvivable loss.

So as we approach the Solstice, Christmas, Kwanzaa and the New Year, may we use these holidays as a wake-up moment to take our emotional temperature and see how we are doing. If we are sensing a feeling of disconnection, to pause and explore it, then decide whether you want to do anything about it. My hope is you will seek a way to reconnect with the sources of value in your life, including the opportunities we offer here.

There is much love in this place already.  
There is always room for more.  
It comes into being when we choose to make connections.

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