“**“Growing through ‘Circles of Trust’”**

February 10, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Church in Lancaster, PA

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The quality of Trust is central to building Beloved Commuity. Through the lens of the “Circle of Trust” program based on the spiritual writing of Quaker Parker Palmer, we explore some of the habits of trust and how to practice these habits in daily life.

**READING: “Trust,” from *The Book of Qualities,* Ruth Gendler**

Trust is the daughter of Truth. Trust has an objective memory, neither embellishing nor denying the past. She is an ideal confidante --- gracious, candid, and discreet. Trust talks to people who need to hear her; she listens to those who need to be heard; she sits quietly with those who are skeptical of words. Her presence is subtle, simple and undeniable.

Trust rarely buys round-trip tickets because she is never sure how long she will be gone and when she will return. Trust is at home in the desert and the city, with dolphins and tigers, with outlaws, lovers, and saints. When Trust bought her house, she tore out all the internal walls, strengthened the foundation, and rebuilt the door. Trust is not fragile, but she has no need to advertise her strength. She has a gambler’s respect for the interplay between luck and skill; she is the mother of love.

**SERMON: “Growing through ‘Circles of Trust’”**

The worship theme of “trust” in February is an apt followup to January’s topic of “possibility.” Possibility opens us to new arenas of life: accepting newness often requires trust. Trust is also appropriate during this month when we send loved ones hearts of all shapes and sizes, and also focus intentionally on black history. Still, neither black history nor love nor trust is a theme for one month only: all are core all year long to building beloved community. Still, in worship during February, let us explore trust. I expect we each have our own experiences with trust, and I invite each of you to go deeper, each in your own way, as I offer some ideas about trust.

Depending on your orientation, the word ‘trust’ may conjure up legal agreements for property or financial assets. My daughter and her wife have just set up a trust fund for my new grandson’s college education. In religious life trust has parallel meaning: trust concerns assurance of the character or ability or strength of another, something in which we can place our confidence. Trust is also related to respect. Soul Matters readings consider trust as confidence in how life will unfold, especially when we do not have total control. Trust is core to religion: “religio” --- bound together --- in mysterious questions of life such as what is love and what happens when we die.

This morning I call each of you to consider what trust means to you. What does trust look like? What are the consequences of trust, in this congregation, in families and schools and work places? For me, trust is an intuitive building block of relationships. Trust is the freedom to be myself, to express my authentic self, to connect openly and honestly, so to live creatively. For me trust relates to survival: in opening myself to another, that I will not only survive but thrive. Trust is conditioned by past experiences: if an event or person hurt us in the past, reminders in the present can trigger distrust. Our sensors go up, sometime unconsciously, lest we relive past hurt. Indeed for me trust is core to spirituality: without trust I cannot build spiritual connections with all life around me.

Importance of trust

Trust is essential to our relationship within ourselves and with others. Communities cannot function productively without trust in their people, their principles, their operations. This is one reason why, at the start of any new group or new relationship, it is imperative to define values and expectations to ground that relationship. This is also the basis of ‘covenant’ in free religion: without covenant, relationships are less trusting. Trust is central to the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: respect for inherent worth and dignity of each person. Trust is essential for a religious community engaged in transitioning ministry as you are, which, by definition, involves change: the more a congregation trusts the change process, the more successful the transitioning ministry.

Trust is also related to power and leadership: without trust in persons and institutions elected or otherwise designated to hold power, we are less likely to give ourselves over to that leadership. Our current political system is in a crisis of trust: it’s hard to trust elected leaders who don’t understand why people are seeking asylum and how regular folks are affected when shutting down the government means loss of income, or don’t understand effects of global warming, or don’t model moral behavior which we want our children to inspire to.

One of the goals of this developmental ministry is to strengthen trust within this congregation. Therefore, today I want to explore trust through the lens of the spiritual practice I bring you: the practice called “Circles of Trust.” Many of you have participated in Circle of Trust workshops. With this practice as our lens, let’s discern some qualities of trust. I also invite you to attend our next workshop, this coming Saturday, February 16.

Several decades ago the Quaker spiritual writer Parker Palmer created the Circles of Trust program and its sponsoring institution, the Center for Courage and Renewal. “Courage” is one of the cornerstones of this spiritual practice: rebuilding trust after trust has been broken, and risking new ways of relating, may require tremendous courage. Parker Palmer calls this work of trust the “challenge of becoming whole.” He wrote: **If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole … we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.”**

Habits of Trust

Now I want to describe some of the practices we use during a Circle of Trust workshop. Perhaps you resonate with some: they may already represent trust for you. Perhaps some are new. Not to do too much word play, but I invite you to trust that Circles of Trust works: it has been tried and tested over the past twenty years by thousands of people. I’ve not known any more sure-fire way of developing intimate relationships so quickly and firmly. I wish I had learned about this method earlier: I might have saved myself a bunch of grief several times over and emerged from challenging situations with my own integrity better intact. I admit it: I’ve become a disciple for Parker Palmer and the courage way

A Circle of Trust is grounded in what are called “Touchstones:” eleven habits which a circle agrees to observe. Touchstones are parallel to “covenant” in free religion. Touchstones include agreements such as giving and receiving welcome, speaking in ways that respect others truth, turning to wonder --- not attack --- when we don’t understand, and observing deep confidentiality. We review Touchstones at the start of every workshop: for one, we need the reminders; for another, they carry different meaning each time we hear them.

Additionally Circle of Trust practices deep listening: some call it “active listening.” When we listen deeply, we are fully present to the person speaking. We are paying attention, not thinking ahead to how we will respond with our ever-so- brilliant words of wisdom. The goal in listening is not to give advice: it is not about the ego of the listener. Deep listening focuses on helping the speaker feel accepted, heard, acknowledged. I wonder if you have had the experience of talking to someone and realizing that the other person is not really listening --- body language, lack of eye contact, perhaps even yawning or interrupting you. One spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, has described deep listening as “spiritual hospitality:” through deep listening strangers become friends very quickly.

One of the materials we use to practice habits of trust is poetry. The beauty of poetry is that no matter how many times we’ve heard a poem, it offers ever new meaning. Here is the opening of one of my favorite poems about deep listening, by John Fox

**When someone deeply listens to you**

**It is like holding out a dented cup you have head since childhood**

**And watching it fill up with cold fresh water.**

**When it balances on the top of the rim**

**You’re understood**

**When it overflows and touches your skin**

**You are loved.**

A partner to deep listening is what I call “deep speaking.” That is, the capacity when you are speaking to know that your words are heard and make sense. A feeling that your presence matters, that you are accepted as you are. Trust of oneself is what Parker Palmer calls “authentic self,” or “true self.” Parker asks: “Is the person (you are dealing with) the same on the inside as he or she seems to be on the outside.” This question is really the core of his life work, to create a practice which allows the self that was born in us to emerge and thrive. So often we have experiences which shut down the true self. This is where the Courage part comes in: it may take huge courage to live authentically, as we deal with social and family and financial pressures and more. The author Mark Nepo wrote: “when I think of those I’ve admired most, they are human beings who have been or are thoroughly themselves.”

Related to the concept of authentic self is that of “inner teacher.” Often in retreats we hear folks say that they would be happy to live an authentic life but they just don’t know who that authentic person is. Parker Palmer believes that we each have the capacity within us to discern deep questions of life. Our workshops help develop habits which allow that inner teacher to emerge. This is not advice-giving: another Touchstone is ‘no fixing, no saving.’ This is not group therapy. Instead this is about helping the other person go deeper. One practice to support self-discernment is called “Clearness Committee,” common to Quakers in which a small circle from the community helps one person go deeper to discern a question or quandary.

Closely related to authentic self is the practice to distinguish between Soul and Role, as Parker calls it. Soul is that authentic self that was born in each of us, role is the persona, or multiple personas, we take on as we go through life. Circle of Trust work creates safe spaces for our souls to show up. As Parker wrote:

**In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy round a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.**

Parker arrived at this concept of soul and role from his own life. By midlife, he realized how much he filled others expectations of him. For example, his family expected him to attend seminary. Fortunately God blessed him with lousy grades to help him see that he was not cut out for ministry. Still, he responded to other external pressures over the years which contributed to three serious clinical depressions. He shut down his soul so far that he didn’t know if he’d get it back. He likens the soul to a frightened, fragile, gentle deer, flitting silently through the woods.

Who are you? Are your soul and your role compatible? Even if your role --- your vocation or avocation --- make certain demands on you, do you have ways of checking in on your soul?

By now you may realize that this stuff of taking on new habits to live into true self can be risky business, especially with years of habits which protect ourselves from hurt or pain or dishonesty. We can feel vulnerable. Yet risk and vulnerability are central if we hope to change personal and community relationships. As M. Scott peck wrote, “**There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace and ultimately no life without community.”** Circles of Trust helps us find Courage to venture into new territory. In workshops we practice open and honest conversation with people who have hurt us or have different views and opinions, or with situations which are boxing us in to roles we don’t want. I’ve never felt so vulnerable and at the same time so safe as in Clearness Committees. In one I was recovering from a hurtful professional experience: as I sat in the trusted circle of people, I saw myself as a fragile bird held in the palm of gentle hands that kept me safe. It was only in that trusting circle, after a month of pain, that I cried for the first time. Once I could admit my vulnerability, I was able to move forward.

The words of Brene Brown sum up the importance of risk: **“Owning our own story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerability is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy --- the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our lights.”**

Results from Circle of Trust retreats

This is only a sampling of how we explore trust through the Circle of Trust program. Here in worship we have the rest of February for more exploration of trust. If you participate in the Circle Trust workshop on Saturday I hope you will find new resources to access your inner teacher, to develop habits of more authentic living. Feeling trust during a workshop is pretty easy. The goal becomes taking that feeling and applying its principles in the real world where we live from day to day. Workshops offer a space to practice new vocabulary, so that in the heat of real life we can risk new conversational style which might feel risky. Our circles help us move past “fight or flight” options, to be able to live more comfortably with tensions and difference, to practice forgiveness and reconciliation, to create an environment in which the soul can thrive. “Circles of Trust” work is both personal and core to creating thriving and trusting congregations, civic communities, family systems, and more. “Circles of Trust” offers new zeal for work and vocation, new inspiration for leadership, new insights into personal development.

During this month I call each us to develop and practice habits of trust. Trust is central to this process of change which defines transitioning ministry. Trust in your expectations for ministry is critical as you move forward with ministerial search. Trust is the foundation of Beloved Community. Trust brings hope and joy and creativity to this journey we call life.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

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