

Theme for February- Intimacy:
The Practice of Sharing

Enlightenment is intimacy with all things - Dogen Zenji

Introduction

Intimacy with others serves as a foundation for experiencing full aliveness and sacredness. Intimacy is a strong emotional connection or attachment that results from shared knowledge and experience. Intimate relationships create a social connection that fulfills our universal need to belong, to love and to be cared for. True intimacy requires an ability to share feelings without fear of negative reaction or judgment. It also requires dialogue, transparency, reciprocity, vulnerability and empathy. Sharing yourself with another person requires a sincere engagement with the whole complex being in front of you. At times being intimate with another may result in hurt and betrayal, and such experiences can lead us to feel vulnerable and insecure in our relationships. For this reason many are reluctant to be intimate with others; however the true human longing remains- a need for a safe place to find deeper, meaningful relationships and build richer connections. Perhaps this is why many of us seek a church community.

Intimacy is a noun meaning “a close association or connection marked by depth of knowledge or broadness of information”. The word intimacy has its root in the Latin *intimare* which means “to make familiar with”. The verb "intimate" means "to state or make known". What the various forms of the word intimacy have in common is the idea of sharing knowledge. If you Google the word intimacy you would conclude that it is all about sex. But truly our heart's longing is to be known and to be unconditionally loved and accepted for who we are.

Since intimacy is a bond formed through the knowledge and experience of another can we attain this state without having knowledge of ourselves? In Buddhist philosophy intimacy with another person isn't possible without the practice of mindfulness. Paying attention on purpose, without judgment, and receiving the whole situation/interaction as it unfolds in the moment requires self knowledge and comfort in sharing our emotional selves. How can we do this if we don't know our own feelings and needs?

Can you be intimate with an idea, philosophy or an object even? Does intimacy require human interaction or can our need for emotional or intellectual intimacy come from something else?

Can we derive a sense of intimacy with people or events that are fleeting and not sustained? Or does true intimacy require time?

Questions for Discussion and Discernment on your own, around the table, or with each other:

- In what settings do you allow yourself to share most sincerely and in an intimate way? In what context do you feel able to share your innermost intimate secrets?
- How often do you find yourself sharing things of an intimate nature with someone close to you? Do you wish you could share yourself intimately more or less than you do presently?
- Do you experience a form of emotional renewal through intimate encounters, or do such encounters leave you feeling drained?

- What does true intimacy require?
- Can you share intimacy with strangers?
- How do you define bringing intimacy to a situation? Does it matter what the other person does?
- Do you bring a more self assured “you” into your intimate relationships?
- Why is sharing so important to teach children?

Quotes and Short Readings

Robert Sachs is unequivocal about the spiritual significance of intimate relationships: ‘True love... [is] the only path to liberation and fulfillment. Knowing how to truly love in every moment and every situation is the quintessential perfection of being human.’

Everybody understands suffering. It's something that we all share with everybody else. It's at once utterly intimate, and utterly shared. So Buddha says, 'That's a place to begin. That's where we begin.'

~W. S. Merwin, poet

Do you see this glass? I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. But when the wind blows and the glass falls off the shelf and breaks or if my elbow hits it and it falls to the ground I say of course. But when I know that the glass is already broken every minute with it is precious.

~Ajahn Chah

Why do we come to church? The answer for many of us is our need for ultimacy and intimacy. Ultimacy is the term Unitarian Universalist James Luther Adams used to describe a desire to be lifted up—beyond the mundane, ordinary, even human dimensions of our lives. Ultimacy is that feeling one may have while walking in the woods and experiencing a sense of awe, sitting in the sanctuary listening to a particular song and feeling a sense of wonder, experiencing transcendence through spiritual practice. There are many paths to ultimacy. We cannot make sense of ultimacy, however, without intimacy. And we cannot recognize intimacy without ultimacy. It is through connection with others that our lives strike a balance between the personal and the universal, the concrete and the felt.

~Rev. Bret Lortie, minister First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio

Rev. John Morgan writes about a time he heard Adams speak in which the theologian explained that “they come to church to wrestle with life’s ultimate questions. Who am I? In what or in whom do I trust? In what community do I belong? And they came for a sense of intimacy, a safe place in which they could be accepted while making connections with others.”

~John Morgan’s *The Devotional Heart*

Intimacy and Ultimacy

In the end, no matter how broken or how well put together our lives may be, we still need each other. We need to be connected to each other — as individuals and in community. We need one another’s hearts and songs to help us find our way through our lives. Indeed, in large part, it is the connections in our lives that give them meaning.

In the preface of Forrest Church’s book *Lifecraft*, he has the audacity to say this:

Let me begin by telling you a little about yourself. To one extent or another, the following is true:

- You are self-conscious about your appearance.
- You feel guilty about things you have done or failed to do.
- You sometimes have a hard time accepting yourself or forgiving others.
- You are insecure sexually.
- You are a less-than-perfect parent, or a less than-perfect child of imperfect parents, or both.
- You are a frustrated husband, wife, or partner, or you are frustrated not to be a husband, wife, or partner.
- You have secrets, which you might betray, or which might betray you, at any moment.
- However successful you are, you fail in ways that matter both to you and to your loved ones.
- Beyond all this, your life is stressful, your happiness fleeting, your health insecure.
- You worry about aging.
- You sometimes worry about dying.
- More than once your heart has been broken by betrayal or loss.
- And however successful you may be, however deep your faith, when the roof caves in, you shake your fist at heaven, the fates, or life itself...
- [And, finally,] you wonder what life means.

How often do we honestly talk about these things with one another? Shouldn't we?

Especially in our busy, fast-moving society, there is a profound need, I would suggest, for people to meaningfully connect with one another – as individuals and within communities. Ironically, even while we are highly “connected” by telephones, cell phones, email, the internet, and so forth, and even while we are sometimes literally surrounded with people all day long, nevertheless, too often we fail to actually talk about what really matters to us. The conversational norms keep us forever skating safely on the superficial surface of our lives. And so we chatter about the weather, about food, about sports, movies, politics – while too often the songs of our hearts sing disconsolately alone – with almost no one to hear and no one to care.

~Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

O God, may we join the human race in daring to live in the prophetic spirit: seeking inspiration like the seers and sages of this and other lands, judging the past as they, acting on the present like them, envisioning a new and nobler era of the spirit.

May we have communities for the whole person: truth for the mind, good works for the hands, love for the heart; and for the soul that aspiring after perfection, that unfaltering faith in life, which like lightning in the clouds, shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark.

~ Unitarian preacher and activist Theodore Parker

You, Reader by Billy Collins

I wonder how you are going to feel
when you find out
that I wrote this instead of you,

that it was I who got up early
to sit in a kitchen
and mention with a pen

the rain-soaked windows,
the ivy wallpaper,
the goldfish circling in its bowl.

Go ahead and turn aside,
bite your lip and tear out the page,
but, listen - it was just a matter of time

before one of us happened
to notice the unlit candles
and the clock humming on the wall.

Plus, nothing happened that morning -
a song on the radio,
a car whistling along the road outside -

and I was only thinking
about the shakers of salt and pepper
that were standing side by side on a place mat.

I wondered if they had become friends
after all these years
or if they were still strangers to one another

like you and I
who manage to be unknown and known
to each other at the same time -

me at this table with a bowl of pears,
you leaning in a doorway somewhere
near some blue hydrangeas, reading this.

<http://www.helpothers.org/story.php?sid=38001> A story of intimacy created through a connection with someone she previously didn't know