We Need Each Other

And Volunteer Recognition

Version 1a

A Sermon by the Reverend Michael Walker

Presented on June 12, 2016 at

Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, PA
INVOCATION

This morning, we light this flame...

In honor of those who selflessly give of themselves,

Who selflessly live to improve the lives of others,

Who voluntarily sacrifice their time and energy.

This morning, we light this flame...

In gratitude for all Volunteers, everywhere.

*May it ever be so and blessed be you all!*
Right Livelihood as a Way of Life
Reverend Michael Walker

We need each other! Without each other, we are all alone, and have a hard time getting things done, in our lives and in the world. But, we are not alone – we do have each other, to help us when we need it. And today, we have recognized and celebrated quite a few of our dedicated volunteers in the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, who work hard to make a difference in the lives of other people. And I know that there are so many others here – perhaps you? – who have also worked hard to do good in the world.

I’m reminded of the wise words of Margaret Mead, who is believed to have once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Nobody seems to know, for sure, whether or not she really said that. However, the sentiment has become a rallying cry for churches, nonprofit organizations, and social justice groups. And so it for us. We have learned that we – here at UCH – can make a difference, when we all work together towards the common good. Our recent Annual Meeting and vote on the Multi-Site proposal are a example to that.

As Unitarian Universalists, we may have practical reasons as to why we volunteer, and... we also have theological reasons for doing all this. Some of us draw from the UU Principles, finding ways to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of all people.
We Need Each Other.

We also work for *justice, equity and compassion in human relations*. But the UU Principle that most encapsulates my belief as to why we help others, is that we have *respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. This is, of course, our Seventh UU Principle, and the one that drew me into UUism, because this Principle is at the very heart of everything I believe in.

As you may have heard me say before, interdependence is a state of relationality. We are interrelated, interconnected, interdependent with one another. None of us would be here without the help of other people – our parents who brought us into the world, our teachers and mentors who helped us become who we are today, and our friends and loved ones who support us through thick and thin. Here, in this community, we have formed what I might call our *little interdependent web of congregational existence*.

And, on a larger scale, humanity is interrelated, interconnected, interdependent with all life on Earth. There are micro- and macrocosms of interdependence at work in our lives, and this state of relationality is where I find the holy. It is a sacred and special thing, when we recognize our connectedness to others, and even more so when we do something to strengthen those connections.

We often do this, when we choose to help others in need. Whether we know it or not, when we help one other person, we are actually helping many others – and the many others happens to include
ourselves. This is probably not your motivation to help others, nor is it mine, but it seems to me that we all benefit from the good that we do on another’s behalf.

My colleague in ministry, Forrest Gilmore, wrote about our Seventh Principle for a book, The Seven Principles in Word and Worship. Just as I have expressed my view of interdependence, this author also feels the interdependent web that we speak of has a deeper theological meaning than just ecology or environmentalism. He wrote an essay about how our concept of this Principle has evolved, but I’m going to share just a short section from his essay. He wrote:

Sociologist Robert Bellah spoke eloquently [about the meaning of the “interdependent web”] in his speech at the annual General Assembly ... in 1998. He said,

Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued, is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual. Nothing ... takes away from the enormous power for good of that idea. But ... it opens the door to the worst in our culture. It easily leads to the idea that humans are nothing but self-interest maximizers, and devil take the hindmost. It is that version that we see all around us. I don’t think we can challenge that
version until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all beings, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves.

That’s the end of the Bellah quote, and Gilmore continues:

[Bellah] then wonderfully challenged us to give up our individualism and make respect for the interdependent web of all existence “the first of your Principles and not the last.”

Our seventh Principle may be our Unitarian Universalist way of coming to fully embrace something greater than our ourselves. The interdependent web—expressed as the spirit of life, the ground of all being, the oneness of all existence, the community-forming power, the process of life, the creative force, even God—can help us develop that social understanding of ourselves that we and our culture so desperately need. It is a source of meaning to which we can dedicate our lives.

There ends the reading.

In that essay, Gilmore went into great detail about how the interdependent web works in our lives, but I’m interested in that quote he used from Robert Bellah, that put the concept of interdependence into dialogue with the concept of individualism. Let’s explore how that plays out in life and even here in our congregation.
Some might say that slavish adherence to a concept of interdependence might prevent us from having what psychologists call self-differentiation. That the other extreme, slavish adherence to differentiation is a form of individualism. I've heard this debated elsewhere before, and I think the debate is problematic because it over-simplifies and conflates some of these concepts. Some of you may recall from a previous sermon that I would argue that it is codependency, not interdependency, that prevents self-differentiation.

To define this concept, self-differentiation, I turn to my bible on church politics, which is *Generation to Generation*, by Dr. Edwin Friedman. In this book, he studies church politics through the lens of family systems therapy, and says,

> “the human components of a family system have the capacity for some self-differentiation, the capacity for some awareness of their own position in the relationship system, how it is affected by balancing forces, and how changes in each individual's functioning can in turn influence that homeostasis.”

Being able to find one’s place in our family system, which we usually call “our congregation,” while not putting that system out of balance, is how we each contribute to the health of our little interdependent web of congregational existence. But if we act as individuals, without regard to our place in
the system or how our actions affect others, we then would be succumbing to a form of individualism that may **damage** our little interdependent web of congregational existence. It’s a balance, homeostasis, which I believe most people here understand and strive to maintain. And it seems to me that the maintaining of this balance – doing things for the good of all – is what really motivates our volunteers to do all the good they are doing! And I am grateful for every one of you, and the work you do make life better for others, here and elsewhere.

Bellah also mentioned “self-interest maximizers,” which I take to mean people who may do things to benefit themselves, and that any benefit to others is of incidental concern. In my view, this is not the most healthy way of living, because the process of accruing benefits of one’s own self-interest has the side effect of turning off others who would have otherwise been interdependent with that self-interested person. In the long-term, those who are out for themselves find themselves alone, when they are most in need of having others in their lives. This excessive self-interest does not maintain homeostasis in any system, including congregations.

Bellah went on to say that we can challenge this way of being by teaching “**that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all beings.**” There it is – solidarity with all beings
recognizes interdependence at work in our lives, in the world, and in all of existence. When we come to treat our neighbors as ourselves, we invite our neighbors to treat us as themselves, and we have then co-created a positive framework for our relationships with all those neighbors. And we have certainly learned that this is true in our congregation. Again, the Annual Meeting was the most recent and, I think, best example of this kind of positive framework.

Back to our earlier topic: why we need each other.

Well, here is a totally different perspective. One of the Old Testament prophets, speaking truth to power in his own way, in his own time and context, said: ... what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8). I rarely – very rarely – quote the Bible, but this teaching from ancient times still stands as a moral code for the modern age. This particular verse was even engraved in large letters on the wall of the sanctuary, at the church where I was ordained, in San Francisco. Yes, a Bible verse on the wall of a UU church! I encourage us to look beyond the theistic language for a moment, and just be aware of the moral undertone of the verse. *To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly.* If you had a mission statement for your life, I imagine it might sound something like that.
We need each other, because it is inherent to the nature of relationality, that we also call each other to follow this same mission: acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly. When each of us does so, we contribute to the greater good, which benefits all of us who are so interdependently entwined with each other.

We call each other to act justly: When some oppression is happening in the world, UUs are often at the forefront of efforts to counter or stop that oppression. Recently, when talking with a group of newcomers to our church, I had occasion to tell the story of the Flaming Chalice in UU tradition. I will share a very short version now. During World War II, while the Nazis occupied several countries in Central Europe, there were many efforts to help Jewish and other people escape. One effort was the Unitarian Service Committee, which had developed something like an "underground railroad". The story says that they put candles in little dishes, on a window sill, to identify a safe-house, where people fleeing persecution, or execution, could stay until they could be smuggled out to Spain and then onto the U.S. To act justly has been a major cornerstone of Unitarian Universalist faith, going back centuries -- the Flaming Chalice of the USC is a relatively recent symbol that identifies a tradition of justice work that actually goes back much further than WWII. Never doubt what a small group of dedicated people can accomplish, right?!
We also call each other to love mercy: When our nation was shocked, angry, and mourning the events of 9/11, UUs still got out and protested going to war. Although the former Army Private Bradley (now known as Chelsea) Manning broke the law, in order to bring information to the public about the war, we protest his prolonged imprisonment. Closer to home, when we hear and see people out of work, homeless, hungry, we want to act -- even when we don't have the means to do so. Our hearts are so full of compassion for our fellow humans, who may have less than us, and we want to help and make a difference in their lives. There are many ways to make a difference -- and I hope we can continue to find ways, together, to do so. Again, Never doubt what a small group of dedicated people can accomplish.

And, finally, we call each other to walk humbly: We look around at the faces here, which comprise our little interdependent web of congregational existence. All around us, we see that this community is full of talent and energy, passion and compassion, joy and sorrow, and many lifelong relationships. It is humbling to look around, and see we are part of something greater than ourselves, and realize that our work here is to improve the whole congregation and surrounding community, and not just to improve our individual selves. And as we cast our gaze further, we see we are part of a larger greatness that is life, our extended families, our careers or volunteer work, and the world at large. It is

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truly humbling to look at all that is life, at all that is in the world, and realize that we have such a small, yet critical role in the spinning and weaving of that great, *interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. Never forget, it is only with all of us working together can we weave that web. We are interrelated, interconnected, interdependent with one another. Truly... We need each other!

_May it ever be so and blessed be you all!_

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**BENEDICTION**

As ever has been, so shall it ever be --

That we need each other,

And that we cannot go it alone.

Look around you, at the faces you see --

Friends and family,

Even those who you just met.

We are all part of something greater.

May the benefits of worship today --

Be embodied in the coming week,

And may we all help one another,

Just as others help each of us.

_May it ever be so and blessed be you all!_