



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Circle of Community”

© by the Rev. Alison W. Eskildsen

A reflection delivered on September 9, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

Community cannot long feed on itself, it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered [companions]. Howard Thurman

Be creative. Use your voice, your community. Ray Toro

A culture that values debate, criticism, and quarrelsome discussions will be more productive, creative—and ironically—harmonious. Dr.’s Todd B. Kashdan & Robert Biswas-Diener

Reflection: (after a telling of the story *The Big Orange Splot*, by Daniel Pinkwater)

After an accidental *splot* of orange paint fell on his house, Mr. Plumbean found an outlet for his creativity by painting it to uniquely reflect who he was. And after inviting his neighbors to his home, they also stopped living in bland, uniform housing. His actions inspired his neighbors’ creativity.

Creativity is our all-Fellowship theme for September. And in this Unitarian Universalist community, we find many ways for you to express your creativity and share your talents. This morning alone some of you have been creative in cooking snacks for us, decorating our chalice pedestal, providing music and leadership, and even problem solving our acoustics. Communities such as ours provide opportunities to stretch or apply your creativity that you might not have anywhere else.

Creativity generally means imagining a unique idea and making it real. You can be a photographer with an idea and then creates a beautiful picture or an architect creating a unique vision for a building. But creativity is more than artistry. You can be a leader with unique ideas for motivating an organization or a therapist with a creative method for helping someone manage grief. You might even be an inventor with a better idea for a can opener or a biochemist with a unique approach to curing cancer. Creativity is a vital part of everything we do.

If we were all the same, like the houses in Mr. Plumbean’s neighborhood, or if we all feared to offer our ideas and solutions to needs, we’d still be living in the Dark Ages. Creativity keeps us moving forward. I just read in the morning newspaper about a 26-year-old implementing a creative idea to capture floating plastic debris in the Pacific Ocean.

The fact that we're sitting in a circle today, instead of merely copying our sanctuary's face-forward approach, is a sign of creativity. I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity that being in the Fellowship Hall offered us. Thus worship in the round, more or less.

I've wanted to worship in the round for quite a while. The sanctuary's fixed pews prevent us from doing this. As part of our renovation we considered replacing the pews with movable chairs, but the money we raised went to higher priorities than buying new chairs. But if, miraculously, new money appeared, and there was strong enough interest, even that might be possible. If you have not yet made a financial commitment for our expansion project we'll be glad to accept it even now.

I like worship in the round because when facing one another, seeing each other, it fosters our sense of community. Our focus shifts off the primary speaker to include the whole community. Everyone facing forward towards the speaker puts us in a very Euro-centric, traditional Christian worship mode.

I imagine some of you have been in or seen pictures of churches where congregants look up towards a pulpit elevated high off the floor. These pulpits place the preacher up in the heavens and imply that the preacher is 1) better than the *hoi polloi* below in the pews, and 2) the preacher is closer to, and speaks for, God. High Protestant churches which place greater emphasis on the Word and less on the sacraments tend to place their pulpits higher than in Roman Catholic churches.

Architecture thus embodies a theological message about the authority of the preacher. I think this message is one reason why the Catholic Church has experienced a great deal of sexual abuse by priests. The innocent and powerless are taught that priests do no wrong, yet we have learned just how wrong they can be. By no means is abuse limited to the Catholic Church, yet unquestioned, dogmatic authority enables it.

In some of our historic UU churches you may find a high pulpit, though it may not be used because it doesn't match our theology today. We are much more egalitarian and much less likely to claim preachers speak for God, especially if that minister doesn't affirm an idea of God.

Admittedly, there is a visual and acoustic advantage to an elevated pulpit, but only ordained clergy are allowed to go up it. When I preach at our sister church in Transylvania from the elevated preacher's box, it feels odd to be separated from the congregation. It goes against our idea of shared ministry or that ministers are called out from the people they serve. Notice that I am in the circle with you, not outside or above you.

Gathering in circles is an ancient practice. Whether around an African bonfire, in a Celtic circle around a holy well, in a Native American roundhouse or teepee, in a pagan cast circle of protection, in Asian symbols of eternity and oneness, or in temples such as Stonehenge, people have shown great respect for the energy and value of a circle. Even King Arthur used a perhaps mythical but egalitarian Round Table to seat his band of knights.

In Latin and African cultures, a strict hierarchical approach is foreign, in part because historically these cultures focused much more on the community and less on the individual. I say historically, because as Western European and American power and culture influence these communities, they change. But so do Euro-centric communities change in response to exposure to

diverse cultures. At this Fellowship we are trying to balance dominant white cultural with other cultural ways in an effort to be more inclusive.

Inclusivity has been a part of our UU tradition for centuries. In a short poem titled “Outwitted,” the Euro-American and Universalist poet, Edwin Markham, born in 1852, wrote:

He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

This poem expresses his Universalist belief that God is Love and God is big enough to love all people. We Universalists believe God’s circle is large enough for us all.

Today, we continue to draw wide circles. If our choir had been with us this morning, we might have sung the song, “Draw the Circle Wide,” as they have in the past. As yesterday’s New to UUFA orientation proves, we keep drawing our circle wide.

If we are to solve the problems of the world and to enjoy our own lives more, we need everyone’s creative ideas. Monochromatic people who think alike will only provide the same solutions and ideas. We need the creativity that diversity offers. We need people like Mr. Plumbean and his neighbors who are willing to express themselves and contribute something unique to the world.

May this be a place for your creativity. And may our circle always be widening, making room for you and many, many more.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you feel more creative when alone or with others? How does your environment affect your creativity? How are you most supported in your creative efforts?
2. Do you like your creative contributions acknowledged, or do you prefer to go unnoticed? Why?
3. In what ways might UUFA foster your creativity? How do you share that with the community?