

**With Power and Purpose: Part 3—“How Do We Relate to the
Community?”**

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Today I am wrapping up my sermon series on our key values as a congregation. These are the things that give us our power and purpose. For those of you who are new today, I hope this is not a difficult or unusual experience for you. You could feel like you just got on an airplane that is showing “Back to the Future Part 3” without first showing parts one and two, and you anticipate being fully and completely lost! Well just to get you up to speed, and to refresh the memories of our loyal viewers at home, I put forth four key values of our church that make us who we are. These values are exploration, interconnection, transformation, and service. Last Sunday I talked about these four values in their imperative form, explore, connect, transform, and serve, as the things we expect of one another as a religious community. Today I want to move us beyond our walls with our four values in hand, and see what there is to see.

I hope that we do not hold onto these four things, exploration, interconnection, transformation, and service in some miserly way. They are not just for us, but for everyone. The world yearns for people who have these values as part of their identity to speak up and speak out against injustice in the world. Let us not be shy with our good news. If I may be allowed a brief Buddhist moment this morning: I encourage you to sit with these four values, breathe with them, let them enter your heart. Or do what Unitarian Universalists usually do when they hear the four things that are the essence of our faith: argue with these four things, tear them up, come up with your own, add to them, par them down in to an even more precise and efficient summary. Whatever you do with them personally, it is important that you take them out beyond here and into your life. Take these nouns I have laid before you and conjugate them into verbs, active verbs that do things out in the world. And so today we will be conjugating once again our four values into gerunds, “ing” verbs. How do we relate to the world as a church? By exploring, connecting, transforming, and serving.

Unitarian Universalists have a complicated history when it comes to interacting with the world outside our doors. Ours is a tradition that has been on the forefront of many important causes in our society. Five US Presidents have been Unitarians. None have been Universalists. Unitarian Universalists have served in the armed forces, and our clergy have been chaplains in the armed forces. And yet there is also a streak

in us somewhere that wishes perhaps that we were a more cloistered faith. I am thinking of some UU churches who seem to want to hide their building as deep in the woods as they possibly can in the fear that someone might actually find them. They figure the people who need to be here will find us! Instead of being beacons of light and hope that shine forth our liberal religious values in the world, some have chosen bushels instead. This is often referred to as the “bunker mentality.” You see it particularly strong in parts of the country, like the Midwest or South, where the mainstream culture is fairly conservative and so the Unitarian Universalists there feel the need to hide away from everyone else. Actually this is somewhat understandable. This was a common temptation in my last church in Omaha. When all of your co-workers are trying to save your soul from the devil, or at least they talk like they might try, then you come to church to be with people who won’t do that to you. It becomes a kind of sanctuary, a relief from the world.

Unitarian Universalists have, as they do with most things, a number of mixed beliefs regarding the afterlife. We don’t have a consensus on that one—not by a long shot! So we are pretty much left with this world in which we already live in as our primary focus. We sometimes love it, we sometimes are in tension with it. Sometimes we are so enamored with the world that we sound like that romantic sap Romeo. How many choices of world do we have? Yet we are also dissatisfied with the world too. There is too much injustice, inequality,

war and hatred in it for most Unitarian Universalists. We feel compelled to work against these things in the world.

So, like Romeo, our love is unrequited. To borrow language from some Christian thinkers on this subject, we might say that Unitarian Universalists are in but not of the world. We are here and a part of it, but we are counter cultural too. We are caught between the twin magnetic poles of attraction and repulsion. How do we move forward? What do we do? How do we relate to the community in which we reside? We relate to it by exploring, connecting, transforming, and serving.

We relate to the world by exploring. By exploring I mean that Unitarian Universalists are not merely one more church on the block. We see ourselves as engaged with and involved with our neighboring faiths. We seek to not just tolerate others, but to be actively engaged in a dialogue of understanding. This exploration is two ways, us trying to better understand them, and hopefully they try to better understand us. This requires that we not be shy about who we are and what we stand for.

My call to the ministry came to me while I was doing this. I became a UU in college and I attended the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor. The minister at the time, Rev. Ken Phifer was very active in interfaith organizations. We had just formed a UU

campus ministry at the University of Michigan, and we scheduled an interfaith dialogue with Reformed Jewish organization Hillel. Ken and a Reformed Rabbi would be discussing the differences and similarities of Unitarian Universalism and Judaism.

Well this was a pretty high minded discussion. If any of you are interested in hearing Rev. Ken Phifer, he is going to be preaching the sermon at my Installation here on March 15. At the time I had been a Unitarian Universalist for about a year. I had been in that mode of constantly asking, either overtly or implicitly, that question “What is Unitarian Universalism?” When this dialogue between the clergy had concluded, the Jewish students all raised their hand with the exact same question. “Hold on a second! We thought you guys were all Christians. What is this?” And Ken did a good thing, he made us students answer our peer’s question. It was the first time that anyone had asked me “What is a Unitarian Universalist?” I got to test my answers.

I wish I could remember exactly what I said. This all happened fifteen years or so ago. But I do know how I felt. I felt energized. It was fun sharing this new religion I had found with people for whom it was all new and completely different. It was like I was showing off my favorite toy to my friends the day after Christmas. It was a feeling that I knew I wanted to have again. I had gone into that event thinking that the ministry was something I could do. I left thinking that it was something I had to do.

I think perhaps Unitarian Universalists can be a bit shy around saying who we are. Of course it is not an easy thing to do when you are unclear about it yourself. But we should bear in mind that we have nothing to be ashamed about. The world is not the hostile place we imagine it to be in our bunkers. There is lots of space between having the courage to say what you believe when you are asked, and pamphletting your neighborhood with UUA brochures. We do our exploring through dialogue not monologue. That is the key difference between Unitarian Universalism and “evangelical” traditions that attempt overt conversion. Their tradition teaches them to speak. Our tradition teaches us to speak and to listen. That is how we are exploring.

We relate to the world by connecting. The priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in south Omaha had a problem. Many of the members of his congregation were losing their jobs. Those that had jobs were never home because of the long hours. Some were even injured on the job and received no benefits or workman’s comp. They couldn’t because some of the members of his primarily Hispanic church were illegal immigrants. The fear of deportation hung over them like a cloud.

Father Damian had a problem. The resources of his small Catholic church were being pushed to the breaking point trying to support and sustain its members. People kept coming to him for help and he was quickly running out of ways to help. What is he to do? Well he went to some of his friends and colleagues in the city, other Catholic priests and

parishes for help. Soon he was put in touch with an organization called the Industrial Areas Foundation. This was a community organizing effort founded on the principles of Saul Alinsky. Father Damian and a few other priests had a meeting with a community organizer, and they decided to organize their congregations around their common interests. They formed an organization called OTOC, Omaha Together One Community.

But this was not just for Catholic churches. Soon the local Reformed Jewish Temple joined, the big liberal United Methodist Church joined, and a number of Lutheran, Episcopal, Baptist, and AME Zion churches joined too. Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, the church I would eventually serve was one of the early members as well.

I learned a lot about how to relate to the world through Omaha Together One Community. Their main teaching can be summed up in one word: Connecting. We relate to the world by connecting together with other churches around common interests. We didn't talk about abortion or gay rights, even though those issues were important to people. We would now call those "wedge issues" because they are brought up to intentionally divide people. Working as individuals we would have divided and conquered ourselves. This group focuses on what connected us. As it turned out Conagra foods, one of the big meatpacking companies in Omaha was running some plants with deplorable conditions. These were the places that Father Damian's

congregants were working at. Turns out that some international human rights watch groups had Omaha Nebraska as some of the worst of the worst in the world for worker's conditions. Not some exotic third world nation, but just a few miles away injustice stood.

So all of these congregations came together and they focused on two things. One was our issues such as improving conditions in meat packing plants. We would stand out at four in the morning, when one of the shifts started, and hand out information to workers going in. We would chant "Si se puede" "Yes we can!" An old organizers slogan—kind of catchy, someone should use it! And we focused on building relationships in the organization, knowing that we had power as institutions far greater than we ever did as individuals. As an organization of institutions we had more power still. I was minister of a one hundred member congregation and I had meetings with the mayor, city councilmen, and once even the Governor. It wasn't because they were impressed with Second Unitarian! It was because I had some standing in a group that was active in connecting. It is an important way in which we relate to the world.

We relate to the world by transforming. Dick Gilbert in our reading today talks about the prophets of Israel and the role they played. The prophets of the Old Testament were not liberal. They were conservatives, at least by their own standards, because they kept calling the nation back to the covenant, the agreement, God had made with

them. This meant that they were constantly pestering the powers that be to practice justice and mercy.

Unitarian Universalists have a similar obligation. For as long as our history, we have had a vision of the world as it should be. Woman's right to vote, the abolition of slavery, the end of segregation, equality and respect for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people have all been important visions and goals for Unitarian Universalists. These are the ways in which we have been transforming the world, the ways we have moved closer to our sense of how it should be. Our acts of transforming the world, when we have been the leaven in our society, are our prophetic voice.

Notice that all of these issues are not done, never completely at least. We are always working on them even when there is a "victory". Because we understand that to transform the world into our vision of what it should be is an ongoing effort. It is transforming—an "ing" verb; ongoing and never complete. At the same time we have added our prophetic voice to causes like environmental protection and sustainability. I remember hearing about those issues in a Unitarian Universalist church about ten years before they went mainstream and Al Gore won awards for saying it in public. We can never up. The transforming power of our prophetic imperative is an important way we have related to the world, and continue to do so.

We relate to the world by serving. I mentioned earlier the importance of working as an institution for social justice. This is my bias because it is the most effective means toward activism. However I do not mean to diminish individual acts of serving others. Serving is like the person walking along the beach filled with starfish washed ashore. As she walks along she picks up a starfish and throws it back into the ocean, thus saving its life. Her friend asks her, “Why do that when there are so many starfish on the beach? What difference does it make?” She replies it make all the difference in the world to that one!

So even small acts of individuals serving others means the world to the people we serve. I think of serving as being less about social justice, and more about spiritual growth and maturity. Serving through giving money or time our other resources that are important to us, is a spiritual litmus test. It demonstrates a high level of personal awareness of the suffering of others. Serving the world is a direct result of the soul work you have done. It is a reflection of how deeply connected one is to the pain of another person. Being so deeply connected to someone else requires a response. Our response to the suffering of the world is serving it. Wisdom and compassion are brought together and set in motion by our acts of serving. This is an important way we relate to the world.

This is how we relate to the world. This is how we express that deep love that Romeo has for Juliet. This is how we love the world

despite the fact that it can be pretty un-lovable at times. May we never lose our new-found center, yet always question it. May we be active in our moving out beyond the comfort of this sanctuary to shine forth the light and life we celebrate here. And may our Unitarian Universalist faith grow forevermore with power and purpose. Amen Blessed Be.