

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan**  
**Andrew Frantz, contract minister**  
**July 5, 2020**

### **Reach Into Community**

*We are living in the greatest revolution in history –  
A huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race:  
Not a revolution planned and carried out  
By any particular party, race, or nation,  
But a deep elemental boiling over  
Of all the inner contradictions that have ever been,  
A revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody.  
This is not something we have chosen,  
Nor is it something we are free to avoid.*  
Thomas Merton, adapted<sup>1</sup>

A few days ago I got a call from a friend of mine. Except it wasn't a regular call, it was a video chat call. And the problem was, that I wasn't dressed and ready for the day. It was that time of the morning when I was already up, but I hadn't taken a shower. My shaggy quarantine hair was sticking up like crazy.

If this had been any kind of a professional call, including someone from this congregation calling, I would not have taken it. As it was, I hesitated for a moment, then I thought about who was calling, and I picked it up.

Chris Long, the friend who was calling, is a ministerial colleague of mine. He has been doing community outreach ministry in Ohio, and he's about to move to New York City to serve as a community minister there. He is a warrior for social justice. When we met, two years ago, we happened to be sharing a hotel room at a minister's retreat in Ohio. We got to know each other by having conversations in the evening before going to sleep, and discovered that we were born in the same month and same year: April, 1968.

I connected the video conference call. I looked at my own image on the phone and saw just how unprofessional I looked. Then I saw Chris, just as disheveled as I was, looking like he had also just rolled out of bed. We had a great talk and renewed a very affectionate friendship—with no barriers and no pretenses.

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My topic today is "Reach Into Community." Like Thomas Merton says in the reading I just shared, we are in a revolutionary time. And my message today is that the appropriate thing to do in such a time is to reach into community for support, for compassion, for courage, and for strength. My primary focus, of course, is on the community of this congregation. And I am clear that this community, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan, is exactly those who are hearing my voice right now. Whether this is your first time here, or you've been coming for years; whether you live just down the street or you are connecting from out of state, you are the congregation. This community has something to offer to you, and you have something to offer this community.

Earlier today we sang that favorite hymn of mine: *From you I receive, to you I give; together we share, and from this we live*<sup>2</sup>. I remember the first time I heard that song, when I was just discovering Unitarian Universalism in Amherst, Massachusetts. I love that song because it puts into poetry the reciprocal nature of community—the give and take. I give to you love and support and compassion; you give it to me. ...Or more accurately, you give

support and compassion to one another. My role as minister means that it's not reciprocal in the same way in this community, and that's why a minister has to have their own network of support and compassion, of courage and strength.

UU ministers are called upon to do a lot in this moment. We are called to lead congregations like this one in a moment of fundamental revolution in society, forward into a world we create with greater love and greater justice for everyone—no exceptions. Ten days ago, I was at the annual national conference of UU ministers. It was on Zoom. Isn't everything on Zoom these days? There were 500 UU ministers gathered from across the country, and we all got T-shirts in the mail. On the back of the T-shirt it reads, BECAUSE WE NEED ONE ANOTHER.

What I'm inviting you to think about today is: What does it look like for you to reach into community for support and compassion, for courage and strength? Who are your people? Who is your community? And how can you tap into that community when you need it.

A key point that I want to make about this, is that reaching into community for support and compassion, for courage and strength, does not deplete the community of those things. Because this is reciprocal, and we give these things to one another, we never run out.

There are many layers of community, and this is true for all the layers. I hope that each of us has at least one close friend or family member that we can identify. Perhaps it's a partner or spouse; or a parent or a child. Hopefully we all have a close circle of family and friends that is our first layer of community. And this idea of abundance applies here. In a healthy marriage, in a healthy family, you can reach into that community for support and compassion, for courage and strength, and you don't leave the marriage or the family with less support and love. It multiplies because when we give away compassion we create more; when we give away courage and inspiration we create more.

Beyond the first layer of close loved ones, maybe you have another layer of community, such as a 12-step group or a support group or a group of friends, and they are a source of renewable support and compassion, or courage and strength.

Then, of course, there is a larger community. For me, there is the community of ministers—life-giving supportive colleagues, the kind of people who know the challenges I face and encourage me to use the gifts that I have—the kind of people who can call me up in the morning and talk to me with bed-head and all. For you, I hope this congregation is that kind of community. I'm not saying that you would take a video call with anyone in this congregation before you shower in the morning—use your judgment on that one. But you can find compassion and support here.

And you're going to need it! You're going to need it today, and in the weeks to come. We are in the midst of a resurging pandemic. This is the second wave that we knew was coming. We knew that our health care system was fragile and that the federal government was not up to the task...we just didn't know that we would be one of the worst governments in the world. The personal and inter-personal challenge is great and it's not going away this month or next month. Therefore, we need each other for compassion and support. I invite you to reach into community for compassion and support. You will not be depleting these resources.

Simultaneously, we are facing the racial justice reckoning of a generation. The last one occurred perhaps in 1968, the year Chris Long and I were born. This is a crucial moment for our society. Some of us – those of us who identify as white, or those who have been socialized into an identity of whiteness – have been able to ignore the depth of the racial injustice until now. That is part of white privilege. No one can ignore it now. As Thomas Merton says,

*We are living in the greatest revolution in history –  
A huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race*

And he says,

*This is not something we have chosen,  
Nor is it something we are free to avoid.*

So for this struggle, we need community to give us courage and strength. I invite you to reach into community for courage and strength. You will not be depleting these resources.

Speaking of struggle, I would like to also share now these words of Nelson Mandela:

*I have walked that long road to freedom.  
I have tried not to falter;  
I have made missteps along the way.  
But I have discovered the secret that  
After climbing a great hill, one only finds  
That there are many more hills to climb.  
I have taken a moment here to rest,  
To steal a view of the glorious vista  
That surrounds me, to look back  
On the distance I have come.  
But I can rest only for a moment,  
For with freedom come responsibilities,  
And I dare not linger, for my long walk  
Is not yet ended.  
Nelson Mandela<sup>3</sup>*

Here in this quote I want to make a side point. My main point today is that as we struggle to create a world of greater love and justice, we can and must reach into community wherever we can find it, to support us, to give us courage. Nelson Mandela isn't talking about community here, he's talking about the ongoing nature of struggle.

I agree with Mr. Mandela. We aren't going to achieve, in my lifetime, an end to militarism, to systemic poverty, to systemic racism, and to environmental degradation. It is an on-going journey. But precisely because of that, we have to stop and enjoy the view from time to time. We have to take care of ourselves along the way because it's not a sprint or even a marathon, it's a journey of days of months and years. And, we need to be in community while we are doing this work, because humans thrive in community.

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Before I end this morning, I want to give one more example of community. I mentioned the close community of family and friends, and larger communities such as this Fellowship. And when it comes to fighting for racial justice, I say that white people need to look to the community of other white people.

I mentioned earlier this morning that this Fellowship is starting a 4-week workshop about white fragility tomorrow. It will focus on the work of Robin DiAngelo, who wrote a bestselling book called White Fragility. She says that racism is a white people's problem. Those of us who believe we are white, or those who have been

socialized into an identity of whiteness—we are the ones who invented the concept of race. Who have projected our own sins onto the racialized other – especially on Black people. White people want to pretend that we don't even have a racial identity. Race is something that other people have – Black people, Indigenous people, People of Color – and therefore the problems of racism are their problems to deal with. In fact, the opposite is true. White people created and maintain the systems that perpetuate racism in this country – such as a police system that kills Black people; such as an education system and an economic system that keep Black, Indigenous, People of Color oppressed; such as a health care system that underserves racial minorities. White people built this and it's up to us to dismantle it. I identify as a white person.

A key to addressing white supremacy culture is for white people to be in community with other white people. Together we can work through our guilt and get past our fragility. As Robin DiAngelo says, it's not whether or not I'm racist, it's how I'm racist. If I am a product of this society, I am consciously or unconsciously racist. A community of white people can talk about this, overcome our white fragility, and figure out that dismantling racism is good for us as well. This is the concept of collective liberation.

When police are killing Black people such as George Floyd and Briana Taylor; when armed citizens are killing Black people such as Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin, this doesn't make me more safe! I will be more safe when Black people are free of this violent oppression. Also, liberating Black, Indigenous, People of Color from oppression frees white people from the role of the oppressor. I'm really sick of that role. I hate that role. I also hate the guilt and the false sense of superiority that comes with being socialized into an identity of whiteness in this society I want to dismantle white supremacy and not be anyone's oppressor any more. That's collective liberation.

To overcome racism, I'm inviting white people to be in community with other white people to find love and courage there. It's not easy, but it is our work to do. Like me taking a video call with a ministerial colleague and friend when we both looked like we just rolled out of bed – find a place where you can be vulnerable and real, people you can trust.

What I'm inviting you to think about today is: What does it look like for you to reach into community for support and compassion, for courage and strength? Who are your people? Who is your community? And how can you tap into that community when you need it?

May you find your community. May they strengthen and support you. Because this moment is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, From *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday). Reprinted in [Lifting Our Voices, Readings in the Living Tradition](#), published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph and Nathan Segal. Hymn #402 in [Singing the Living Tradition](#), the Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Mandela, From *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Little, Brown, and Co.). Reprinted in [Lifting Our Voices, Readings in the Living Tradition](#), published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2015.