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Sunday Sermon: “Connecting the Dots”

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It is such a pleasure to be in a congregation that has children in its midst, isn't it? Children let us know when what we are doing or saying (or even wearing) is nonsense! I remember vividly serving a congregation where I thought I'd try to be funny and tell a joke to start off the 'time for all ages' portion of the service. I thought it was a pretty good joke to share with children: Why did Wifi and the computer get married? They had a connection. A just-turned-five little girl who was clearly wise beyond her years let out the deepest groan I've ever heard. She clearly did not enjoy the joke and I asked her, "not funny?" She looked me straight in the face and said "Reverend Kathleen, you need to keep working in the daytime"! I kinda think she was telling me to keep my day job.

I had told that joke as way to start a conversation on the topic of connection. It is a topic I am deeply passionate about. The concept of connection is an important part of the mission of the Yale Humanist Community where I serve as the Executive Director. It is a part of our mission to provide a community where people find inspiration and meaning through connection. And my own understanding and descriptions of connection are ever-evolving as my own life evolves.

The most powerful definition of connection to date for me comes from author and research professor, Brenè Brown. She says connection is "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and when they can give and receive without judgment". Imagine that! The energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and when they can give and receive without judgment. That is powerful. So with my mind and heart focused on the power and importance of connection I've developed a connect-the-dots model that I use to assist me in creating that energy Brenè Brown speaks of. It's a triangle of sorts with 2 point of awareness as the foundation that point toward the third dot of unexpected action. Let me illustrate.

Dot 1. Let's locate this point on the lower left of the triangle. We cannot live for ourselves alone. This comes from the wisdom of Herman Melville, 19th cent. American novelist who was a member of All Souls Unitarian in New York City. *Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.*

Consider that point of awareness: we cannot live for ourselves alone. And let me ask you - answer silently - How many people would you feel comfortable discussing a very important and very personal issue with? How many people? Think about it. There is no right or wrong answer. Remember that it's a very important and very personal issue. Now I am going to ask you to reveal if your answer was 10 or more people. So there are a few of you. Really just a handful who would feel comfortable discussing a very important and very personal issue with 10 or more people. That answer is quite uncommon. In fact, from 1985 to 2004 the average answer dropped

from 3 to 2 and the percentage of people who reported having no such confidants rose from 10% to 25%. That was over 10 years ago and I don't think the result have gotten better. 25% had absolutely no one they felt they could discuss a very important and very personal issue with. A 2010 report showed an analysis of nearly 150 studies of social support that suggested social isolation increases the risk of death about as much as smoking cigarettes and more than either physical inactivity or obesity.

It's important to know that when we feel lonely, there are regions of our brain that activate in a similar way to when we feel physical pain. Our brain recognizes pain and reacts similarly whether it's the pain of loneliness or stubbing our toe (or worse). An article in Scientific American explains that when we experience social pain — a rebuff, cruel words — the feeling is as real as physical pain. Scientists are making the case that our need to connect is as fundamental as our need for food and water. You see, long before there were any primates with a neocortex, mammals split off from other vertebrates and evolved the capacity to feel social pains and pleasures, forever linking our well-being to our social connectedness. We easily recognize that infants embody this deep need to stay connected, but we too often insist that the need is immature, claiming 'time to grow up', 'we don't need that warm and fuzzy stuff', 'connection is dependence', etc. But the truth is that the deep need to be connected is present through our entire lives. From birth to death we need to be connected.

Social relationships are a critical component of a meaningful life and those relationships, those connections, are born out of the subjective experience of belonging. Belonging is indeed a subjective state that is affected by your mood, your health, and self-perceptions. So it doesn't matter how many Facebook friends you have, or 'like's on your posts, or how many Twitter followers you have, or how many contacts are in your phone or, if you're old school, how many names are in your address book. Belonging has nothing to do with how many people you know or places you belong to. Belonging is primal. It is fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being.

I think we all recognize that inspiration and meaning can be found through a variety of experiences and can certainly be found solo (think music, art, nature). But when we find inspiration and meaning through connection, we satisfy and nourish a fundamental human need. We are wired with a need to belong, to be a part of something, to have shared experience. Belonging has broad consequences. Our interests, motivation, health and happiness are inextricably tied to the feeling that we belong to a greater community that may share common interests and aspirations. So it was interesting when Tom Krattenmaker, Yale Humanist Community board member and author of *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower*, shared his written words: "More and more of us are experiencing the ups and downs and triumphs and devastations of human existence— the births and deaths and all the major milestones in between— with no religion to lean on, with no divinely ordered structure to hold us. We face our mortality and all the other vexing mysteries of life naked. What happens now to society, and us?" Well, it brings me to the second point of awareness.

Dot 2: This would be the dot on the lower right of the triangle. We don't accomplish anything in this world alone. This comes from the wisdom of Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. *We don't accomplish anything in the world alone, and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.*

In my doctorate studies at New York Theological Seminary it's a challenge being the only Humanist student and the only non-theist. But I recognize the opportunity for connection that I have with my fellow students. In a paper we were required to write about the purpose for human life I noted that in monotheistic religions where God is the Creator of humans, the purpose for human life flows from the purpose for God's creating. Therefore, it may be concluded that the purpose of life is the realization of what is most essentially human - the manifestation of God within. But that is in conflict with Humanist thought. One of my UU seminary mentors who just died a few months ago, William Murry, was President of Meadville-Lombard Theological School when I arrived to start my MDiv. He taught me what humanism was and encouraged me in my ministerial formation. Rev Murry summed up the Humanist viewpoint as such: "Life's meaning is not a given, not inherent in life itself, and not dependent on belief in God. We are the meaning makers; we are the ones who make our lives worth living." The second iteration of the Humanist Manifesto confers, boldly claiming that humans are responsible for "what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves."

While other creatures have life, consciousness, intelligence, and even some limited linguistic ability, only human beings are responsible to choose their manner of life and hence their destiny. Responsibility is central to what it means to be human and that responsibility connects to purpose through relationships - we don't accomplish anything in this world alone. Human beings are social beings and participants in the web of all life. The joining of individuality with interdependence enriches our lives, encourages us to enrich the lives of others, and inspires hope of attaining peace and opportunity for all. Such interdependence is where human beings find identity, meaning, and fulfillment as it is manifest in connection.

I often think back to my experience of looking for connection in a community where people would come together with a desire to live ethical lives and improve upon the world. A connection where I would be seen and heard and be able to give and receive without judgment. Not totally unlike the connection in religious community I had experienced as a child and young adult, but I wasn't interested in dogma or creed. I didn't even know what UUism or humanism was at the time! In W. Redding, CT, my husband and I happened upon a barn structure tucked away on a wooded street with a sign the size of a postage stamp and no clearly marked entrance. We sat in our car and waited to see where people entered and then assumed that was where we too should enter. It was a small progressive congregation of Unitarian Universalists and much to my surprise I recognized 3 families there! Three families that I saw several times a week at the drop off and pick line at school. Three families I had talked to many times at school functions and even at playdates for our children. I found myself feeling hurt and angry that they had never mentioned this amazing community to me. I needed connection and community. I had been

desperately longing for such a community but they had never thought of sharing it with me. I told them how I felt and I did get past the anger and hurt. But most importantly, I made a promise to myself that I would not follow suit. That I would tell others and offer the opportunity for community and connection.

Being aware that we cannot live for ourselves alone and that we don't accomplish anything in this life alone - connecting those dots leads us to a point of unexpected action.

Dot 3. This is the dot at the top of the triangle, the unexpected action that is required once we connect the 2 dots of awareness. Awareness guides us to Just listen. Not to fix, not to save, not to change, but to listen. It comes from the wisdom of Rachel Naomi Remen, author and teacher at University of California, San Francisco. *The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.*

5 years ago Yale student Marina Keegan a 22 year old author and playwright wrote a graduation essay titled The Opposite of Loneliness. It was distributed at the class of 2012's commencement exercises. Just 5 days after graduating and ready to begin a job at The New Yorker, she died in a car accident on Cape Cod. Here are some of Marina's words:

We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life. What I'm grateful and thankful to have found at Yale, and what I'm scared of losing. It's just this feeling that there are people who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt.

Tiny circles of people we pull around ourselves. Groups that make us feel loved and safe and part of something even on our loneliest nights when we stumble home to our computers - partner-less, tired, awake. I'm scared of losing this web we're in. This elusive, indefinable, opposite of loneliness.

We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did I'd say that's how I feel now and that's what I want in life

What *is* the opposite of loneliness? Maybe it's connection as connection is about belonging. Regardless of your religious orientation, belonging and being valued is important. We human beings are hardwired for connection and it's how we can find inspiration and meaning, how we can face our mortality and all of the triumphs and failures, heartache and deep love, simple pleasures and devastating pain that this beautiful and bruising world presents us.

That's exactly what Yale Humanist Community seeks to do. It's what I seek to do. How about you and UCWH? Connect the dots of awareness - we cannot live for ourselves alone and we don't accomplish anything in this world alone -with action - just listen. We connect the dots and bring people together not because we expect people to be perfect, not because we're certain of our own righteousness, not because we need someone else to tell us what to believe or how to act. But because we hope to find authentic people, because we are continually searching for the

right, the good, the uplifting, because we need each other and we realize that connection is a primal need. We need one another!

We are as Rumi proclaimed. Indeed, we are the three or four walls together that support a roof and keep the grain safe and dry. We are the ink and pen that bring the blank paper to life. We are the rushes and reeds woven together. Connected. Belonging. As to neighbor and to stranger, we say shalom, salaam, amen, blessed be, and to each and all, Namaste.