

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

# **INTIMACY AND ULTIMACY**

**Including an Introduction  
to the Chalice Circles Program**

**The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy**

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## SILENCE FOR REFLECTION

Today, I want to talk about “Intimacy and Ultimacy.” I want to suggest that, in the end, no matter how broken or how well put together our lives may be, we still need each other. We need to be connected to each other – as individuals and in community. We need one another’s hearts and songs to help us find our way through our lives. Indeed, in large part, I want to suggest that it is the connections in our lives that give them meaning.

So, at this time, let me invite you to briefly reflect upon your own connections to the individuals of your lives and to the various communities of which you feel a part. . . .

**READING**                      **from *Lifecraft***                      **by Forrest Church**

Our Reading this morning is from a book called *Lifecraft* by my Unitarian Universalist colleague Forrest Church. Forrest is reflecting here on how we fill our lives with distractions and busyness, but where is the meaning?

“We live,” says Church,

in an amazing age. Conveniences are many, and entertainments, more alluring than ever, are accessible in unprecedented quantity and variety: television, video games, sports, liquor, drugs, the stimuli that captivate our minds, all of it packaged attractively for ever pocketbook and taste. How easily and comfortably we are swept along. The lowest common denominator veritably sparkles. Inertia leads, and we follow in the dance.

Most of us manage to make a working pact with life. We settle into the routines, cope surprisingly well with hardship, rise to occasions, and wend our way more or less successfully from one day to the next. I am no exception. My life is ever so much more pleasant than unpleasant, far more rewarding than it is taxing. I enjoy my little triumphs. I savor moments of relaxation with my family and friends. And yet, I take so much for granted: my loved ones, my projects, life itself. What is more, I begrudge these things the difficulties they cause me. I forget how much they mean to me. How much they simply mean.

I fill my days. There are things to be done and things to be avoided. We each have our race to run with time. Not that this is always bad, but lacking something more, the meaning piece is missing. Most of us know this. The question is, what, if anything, are we prepared to do about it?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Church, Forrest, *Lifecraft* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), pp. 88-89.

## INTIMACY AND ULTIMACY

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

In the end, no matter how broken or how well put together our lives may be, we still need each other. We need to be connected to each other — as individuals and in community. We need one another's hearts and songs to help us find our way through our lives. Indeed, in large part, it is the connections in our lives that give them meaning.

In the preface of Forrest Church's book *Lifecraft*, he has the audacity to say this:

Let me begin by telling you a little about yourself. To one extent or another the following is true:

- You are self-conscious about your appearance.
- You feel guilty about things you have done or failed to do.
- You sometimes have a hard time accepting yourself or forgiving others.
- You are insecure sexually.
- You are a less-than-perfect parent, or a less-than-perfect child of imperfect parents, or both.
- You are a frustrated husband, wife, or partner, or you are frustrated not to be a husband, wife, or partner.
- You have secrets, which you might betray, or which might betray you, at any moment.
- However successful you are, you fail in ways that matter both to you and to your loved ones.
- Beyond all this, your life is stressful, your happiness fleeting, your health insecure.

- You worry about aging.
- You sometimes worry about dying.
- More than once your heart has been broken by betrayal or loss.
- And however successful you may be, however deep your faith, when the roof caves in, you shake your fist at heaven, the fates, or life itself....
- [And, finally,] you wonder what life means.<sup>2</sup>

Now, I cannot speak for you, but, to one extent or another, indeed, I found each one of these statements to be true of me. Moreover, some of them are important admissions. And yet, how often do we honestly talk about these things with one another? Shouldn't we?

Especially in our busy, fast-moving society, there is a profound need, I would suggest, for people to meaningfully connect with one another – as individuals and within communities. Ironically, even while we are highly “connected” by telephones, cell phones, email, the internet, and so forth, and even while we are sometimes literally surrounded with people all day long, nevertheless, too often we fail to actually talk about what really matters to us. The conversational norms keep us forever skating safely on the superficial surface of our lives. And so we chatter about the weather, about food, about sports, movies, politics – while too often the songs of our hearts sing disconsolately alone – with almost no one to hear and no one to care.

## II

Let me share a story with you. It is a story told by my

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<sup>2</sup> Church, op. cit., pp. xi-xii.

colleague Gene Pickett, a past President of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Gene shares here his own story of isolation, and the need to connect with others, which eventually led him to a Unitarian Universalist church.

“During my growing up years,” Gene explains,

in a small village in Maryland, the local Methodist Church was central in my life. But in my high school years, questions and doubts about my religious beliefs began to surface. Feelings of isolation began to grow, for there was no one with whom I could discuss my changing beliefs and experiences, no one to share my yearning and searching. My high school and early college days and my time in the Navy were deeply lonely times.

I still recall with painful intensity those early months in the Navy when I was just eighteen, frightened, and alone. At the end of the day, I would crawl into my bunk, and pull the blankets over my head, and pray that God or someone would help me in my loneliness, and then I would cry myself to sleep - fearful that someone in a nearby bunk would hear me. Praying didn't seem to help, but I think the crying did. How much I needed someone to share my search. How great was my need for someone to care. The need for a supportive and searching religious community has never left me. That, in part, is why I became a minister; that, in part, is why I am committed to building a strong Unitarian Universalist movement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pickett, Eugene, as cited by Mendelsohn, Jack, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 174.

Even in its absence, I think Pickett puts his finger on one of the defining characteristics of meaningful community – it’s connecting with people who truly care about one another. It’s connecting with people with whom we can honestly open up, be ourselves, tell our stories, share our feelings, and be affirmed and supported.

As Thomas Naylor says in his book, *The Search for Meaning*, “The ultimate test of whether or not a collection of individuals is a community is whether the members are seriously concerned about one another’s well being.”<sup>4</sup> And being connected with others in this way can make a huge difference. As some of you know, it can literally save one’s life. I have seen it happen more than once.

### III

Scott Peck, in his book *Further Along on the Road Less Traveled*, takes this idea of the importance of caring even further (or in a somewhat different direction). Peck suggests that when Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of God he was talking (at least in part) about the wonders of a caring community. Peck quotes the celebrated Bible passage in Luke, chapter 17, when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming. And Jesus says, “Look, you won’t be able to see the Kingdom of God when it comes. You won’t be able to say, ‘Look, here it is!’ Or, ‘Look, there it is!’ For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is within you.”

Now, Peck does some Biblical exegesis with this passage in Luke (comparing the Aramaic with the Greek translations and so forth) and then he goes on to argue that when Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is within you,” what he really meant was “The Kingdom of God is *among* you.” Meaning, in other words, according to Peck, that the Kingdom of God is to be found in com

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<sup>4</sup> Naylor, Thomas H., et. al., *The Search for Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 130.

munity.<sup>5</sup>

Now, traditionally, Christians have argued that Christianity spread like wildfire in its early years because of the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinity) that came down and filled the early disciples with special divine gifts — namely, the gifts of charisma and tongues, allowing them to speak eloquently and in all languages. That’s the traditional understanding of how Christianity spread — it was through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Keith Miller, however, in a book called *The Scent of Love*, suggests that what really happened was that, through the ministry of Jesus, the disciples and the early followers had discovered the secret of community — the Kingdom of God, no less.

In other words, someone would be walking down a back alley, let’s say, in Corinth or Ephesus and see a group of people gathered around talking excitedly about a simple, loving man who talked enigmatically in parables about mustard seeds and buried pearls, about loving one’s enemies (of all things!) and giving away one’s coat, about being as carefree as the birds of the air and as the lilies of the field. There was a special quality about these people as they talked to each other, laughed together, cried together, prayed together that drew others to them. The “scent of love” (as Miller suggests in his title) seemed to drift down the alley and attract people like bees to a flower. People might have said to themselves, “I don’t understand this yet, but there is something special going on here — and I want in! For these people truly care about — and love — one another.”<sup>6</sup>

#### IV

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<sup>5</sup> Peck, M. Scott, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

Now, the church is certainly not the only place where we can make meaningful, caring connections with others, but it is at least one good place to do so. Because in the church we are naturally called to care for another. And people do connect and care here – in the choir, in classes, in committees, among the circle suppers, in our special interest groups (like WomanSpirit and the Humanist Quest), and so forth. At our best, while we are always imperfect, nevertheless, this is a wonderful community of smaller communities of people who truly care for one another.

Beginning in February, after more than a year of intensive study, we are going to launch a new program here at church called “Chalice Circles.” You may have read or heard about it. The main thrust of this program will be to intentionally help us to build *connections* between one another and to build *community* among us. Groups like our Chalice Circles are a phenomenon that is sweeping through our Unitarian Universalist churches with considerable success.

The concept is simple. Our Chalice Circles program will consist of small, facilitated groups of approximately nine people each who will mostly meet in homes (although this may vary depending upon the participants).

The groups will have an established routine for their meetings. There will be a chalice lighting, opening words, sounding of a gong, and silence for reflection. Then there will be time for what we call a personal “check-in,” where we will be invited to share how it really is going in our lives, how it really is with us – in our personal or professional life. This, in turn, will be followed by a guided discussion on a topic of some personal or spiritual significance. Then the meeting will close with a brief check-out about how the meeting went, followed by closing words, and the extinguishing of the chalice.

Experience suggests that with sensitive leadership and growing trust, which develops over time, a deep and authentic

intimacy can develop in these groups, especially as we share the deeper (or as theologians would say, the “ultimate”) concerns of our lives – the joys, the struggles, the defeats, the surprises, the poignancy of being alive and one day having to die.

Meanwhile, the facilitators will meet monthly with Lisa Radtke, who will be the Program Coordinator for this program, and me for support and further training in our own Chalice Circle. There will be regular opting in and out times, occasionally there may be service projects, and each group will be asked to agree on some guidelines (regarding confidentiality and so forth) in what is called a covenant.

Some of these groups may be formed as affinity groups, as well, such as a men’s group, a women’s group, an inter-generational families group, a “West of 65” group, or whatever.

We hope to start with up to seven or eight groups, and we will see where it goes from there. If you are interested, I invite you to join us at the kickoff event for our Chalice Circles, which will be at what we call a “Breaking Bread, Building Community” evening on Wednesday, January 16. At that time, if you wish, you will have an opportunity to actually experience a Chalice Circle to see how you like it. The sign-up for the “Breaking Bread, Building Community” evening will begin next Sunday.

Again, the church is not the only place we can make meaningful, caring connections with others, but it is at least one good place to do so.

## VI

In his book *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, the Buddhist Jack Kornfield tells us about Ishi, the last member of the Yana Indian tribe. Kornfield explains that the book,

*Ishi in the Two Worlds* is the remarkable account of the last remaining Yana Indian of California, who was befriended by anthropologists Theodora and Alfred Kroeber. Ishi told stories about the way of life of his people, never more to be seen on this earth. Yet one of the most moving stories was not told in the book. Among all the teaching songs and exquisite knowledge of nature Ishi revealed to the Kroebers, there was one sacred song that he had been sworn never to teach to anyone outside the tribe. It was the song sung to the dying, used to sing his people back to their families, to their ancestral lands after death. No one outside the tribe was allowed to know how to go there. Yet Ishi was alone at the end of his life, the last member of his tribe. It was then that he taught his secret song to the Kroebers, so they could sing him back to his people.<sup>7</sup>

So, again, in the end, no matter how broken or how well put together our lives may be, we still need each other. We need to be connected to each other – as individuals and in community. We need one another’s hearts and songs to help us find our way through our lives. And just possibly – I’m not so sure about this, but just possibly – if Scott Peck and Keith Miller are right, it is in caring, loving communities that we can get at least a taste, perhaps, of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Kornfield, Jack, “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry,” *The Sun*, December 2000, p. 31. This article is excerpted from his book of the same title.