

“The Art of Communication”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

February 20, 2022

“I’m here for you.”

Little did I know that those few words would lead to a request that would change the history of our church.

Father Jarred and I had been getting to know one another since he and his family moved here last August. We are both active in the local clergy association and had enjoyed a private cup of tea and conversation together, outside at one of the tables near Mr. India.

It was fun to get to know some of his history, how his family moved here after spending ten years in London, and why he had chosen a position as a parish priest over an academic post. We bonded over similar experiences we had moving to Newburyport and our adherence to the teachings of Jesus, namely nonviolence and to love your neighbor.

I was not surprised then to learn that Father Jarred’s parishioners at Saint Paul’s were converting their Sunday School classrooms into temporary housing for Afghan refugees. I immediately sent him an email assuring him that our congregation and I would do whatever we could to support their efforts. I closed the email with the line, “Whatever you need, *I am here for you.*”

Two weeks later, I had an email from Father Jarred: “We’re going to run out of room,” he wrote. “There’s a second family coming in a few days to live in our space and a third family whom we cannot house. Can FRS provide a temporary home for them?”

Thus began a journey that started with a unanimous vote of the Parish Board on December 14th, followed by a remarkable 28-day feat, in which you converted our Parish Hall into a warm and welcoming home. Well over one hundred people helped do this and are continuing to help. Who says Unitarian Universalists don’t believe in miracles? We just believe that we have to be a part of making them happen!

Members and friends of this congregation as well as others in the larger community have stepped up to provide rides, take our new neighbors

grocery shopping, teach ESL, donate items from rice cookers to umbrellas and sleds, make runs to the dump, oversee construction projects. Our most important priority now is to help secure permanent housing for the family.

The success of this project is also due to many people working behind the scenes. This includes staff, especially Rob Authier, our Director of Church Operations, Diane Carroll, our Office Administrator, and Donny Rogers, our Sexton. It also includes parishioners who are ensuring that the “other” work of the church is continuing, work such as fundraising, governance, finance, and communications.

I also thank everyone in this congregation for the moral support and encouragement. The thank-you notes, encouraging emails, smiles, and social media posts matter. They give us strength and remind us we are not alone. It does take a village to care for our spiritual community.

People are curious about the family and ask us all kinds of questions, such as, “*What are the kids like? How are they doing in school?*” And of course, “*Is communication difficult? Do they speak any English?*”

We can answer those questions. The kids are amazing. Each one is different and, we’re learning, remarkably like American children. For example, a tween doesn’t want snow boots. They want cool sneakers. They are doing great in school. The school system is providing astonishingly good care and educational resources, including training for staff, hiring translators, and sending emails home in Dari.

Communication has been much easier than imagined. While they are learning English, we are using Google Translate, which works both from Dari to English and English to Dari. Communication also involves hand signals, facial expressions, and head tilting.

While communication with the Mirzayee family has been relatively easy, communication within the community partnership has been hard, and we are all fluent in English.

Several groups are working together to make this happen. Groups within FRS, such as the ESL

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group, are hanging curtains and getting groceries. Thank you, Susan Thorne and Yvonne McQuilkin. A group is working to coordinate fundraising and volunteering between the churches and other community groups.

We also have what we call the working group, a diverse group of seventeen people who meet weekly to coordinate the relationships with and settlement of what are now five Afghan families living in Newburyport. This group consists of three clergypersons, five community volunteers, representatives from two resettlement organizations, two state departments, the schools, nonprofits, and the office of a United States Representative. Given the number of issues we are dealing with, the speed at which things change, and the urgency of the things that need to happen, combined with the mix of personalities, styles, and preferences -- well, let's just say it's been a communication learning laboratory.

In any one meeting, I interact with my father, disguised as a community member who intimidates me with the depth of his knowledge, my mother, looking very much like an employee with a disapproving face, and my brother, who tries to steal all the thunder in a room. I am kidding of course, but not really.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes in his book *The Art of Communication* "When we practice in a community, there are more people to support us but also more opportunities for frustration and anger. Loving speech and deep listening are key to community building."¹

Community can be like walking into a hall of mirrors. We must know ourselves well enough to be able to distinguish our distorted thinking from what is actually happening and sense when our reaction to a situation or person is infused with our own history.

This happens to everyone. There is nothing wrong with us because we get triggered or respond in less-than-ideal ways. We are all doing our best. We all have histories, full of garbage and glory, love and pain, loss and recovery. The problems come when we forget this and act from a place of

1 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating* (New York: Harper One, 2013), 134.

unresolved past.

Just as there is nothing wrong with us for having things we are still working on and places in us that hurt, there is nothing wrong with a community or group of people who have things they are still working on and experiences that cause hurt. What matters is how we respond to those things.

We most likely respond to pain as a member of a community in the same way we respond to pain within ourselves. This is true whether the pain is anger, fear, grief, or any number of other challenging emotions. We may want to forgive and forget, move on to the next thing, or stuff the pain; and then we wonder why we feel less connected to the community. Those who learned to fight fire with fire may become enraged when there is disagreement. While still others of us may freeze, shut down, or put the blame on ourselves when something difficult happens.

The key to learning how to effectively communicate, says Thich Nhat Hahn, lies first within ourselves. In learning to recognize, understand, and accept our own pain or suffering we are better able to offer compassion, curiosity, and openness to others who suffer, which is everyone. He calls it coming home to ourselves. He writes, "To stop and communicate with yourself is a revolutionary act."²

This is not easy work. It is not ever "done"; however, it does lessen and lose its control over us. Richard Rohr says that we either transform our pain or we transmit it.

Communication and community both come from the Latin word *communicare*, meaning to impart, share, or make common. The people in the community collaboration I described earlier are stand-ins for the people with whom I had the original pain. If we are not careful, we repeat the same patterns of communication and relationship over and over again, reenforcing the original wounds. We can heal this internal pain, but we can't do it alone. We often must be in relationship to have the pain exposed. Tai calls it "bumping up against my sensitivity."

We experienced this at our annual meeting last year. A conflict arose around proposed changes of

2 Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*, 15.

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pronouns in the bylaws. Things got heated, harsh words were said, people were hurt. I have no doubt that many of our sensitivities were bumped up against.

We have choices here. We can pretend this didn't happen, we can try to find a way around it, we can stifle the pain, or threaten to leave the community; or we can use this experience to learn and grow stronger as a community. We can talk with one another and learn more about the issues, other people's stories, and ourselves. To use CB Beal's term from last Sunday, we can bear witness.

*Talking about our lives and having our truth received...
care and trust is built when people bear witness to themselves and one another.*

When we bear witness to people, we must consistently notice and set aside our thoughts and assumptions; the things that don't make sense to us because we don't yet have the whole picture. We must recognize when what we are bearing witness to is so different from our own experience, we must take care not to dismiss it.³

Your Parish Board wants to provide opportunities for us to do just this – to bear witness, practice having the challenging conversations, and learn how to disagree, stay together, and grow stronger because of it. They have put together a series of congregational discussions that will take place in March and April. These two-hour discussions will use our Affirmation of Faith as a guide to allow folks to talk about topics about which we have differing opinions. We need to learn how to do this, in preparation for this year's annual meeting. We'll need the same skills as we immerse ourselves in our values, mission, and ends over the next several years and face decisions such as what we are going to do with long-term renovations to the Parish Hall.

We believe having these conversations this spring will help all of us grow into more compassionate, openminded, and supportive individuals, even as it supports our common bond as a church community. They are also essential building

blocks for being in community, in true harmony and peace.

Returning to that difficult communication I spoke about at the start of the sermon, with the community collaboration, it is hard, and it is transforming my life, inside and out. May it be so here. May it be so for all of us.

Amen and blessed be.

3 From sermon delivered by CB Beal, February 13, 2022.