

**Being, Belonging, Balance**  
**two short talks by Rev. Dr. David Breeden**  
**at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis**  
**Fall Equinox celebration, September 18, 2022**

**Part One: Belonging**

In the reading this morning, the contemporary American poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer wrote:

And if it's true we are alone,  
 we are alone together,  
 the way blades of grass  
 are alone, but exist as a field. ("Belonging")

As poetry will, these lines hold a deep truth: Yes, we are alone; and, no, we are not alone: We are in fact . . . alone together.

It's a paradox. As is much of human life.

The very concept of liberalism is bound up in claims of individual worth and dignity—that's the first UU Principle. Individualism.

#Individualism has long been a goal of European political thought. Yet, despite the many fictional depictions of the lone, successful individual—think Clint Eastwood—relational being is our lived experience.

#Relational being: We know we are connected, but what does that mean? This question sets up an anxious tension that permeates Western societies:

. . . if it's true we are alone,  
 we are alone together,

#The disjunction between our mythology of individualism and our actual location in community can be wrenching, as many in our society live in the anxiety of personal accusations of failure, which often leads to dropping out of the very community networks that would bring relief and perhaps even success.

### **Staying in Your (Bowling) Lane**

Back in 2001, the American political scientist Robert D. Putnam published *Bowling Alone*. In that now-classic book, Putnam traced an alarming trend of disengagement from traditional social anchors such as sports leagues, service clubs, social organizations, and organized religion.

#What was being lost, according to Robert Putnam's research, was an intangible but very real asset—"social capital," which he defines as "ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties."

#Looking at the entire title of the book— *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*—we can now see that Dr. Putnam's optimism was showing. The sad fact is that the decline in social cohesion that Putnam traced in 2001 has only accelerated with the advent of social media, a reality that becomes painfully clear in Putnam's recent twentieth-anniversary revision and reissue of *Bowling Alone*.

We all do well to join Putnam in searching for an antidote, even if trends show that such an eventuality is not at all likely. A recent headline in the online publication FastCompany.com sums up the challenge: "A sense of belonging is what drives well-being—and it's disappearing."<sup>1</sup>

#The challenge is clear: Americans are losing connection with each other and therefore our larger society is fragmenting, in ever-wider circles.

That's bad for the individual human psyche, for social cohesion, and for political stability. Community and the sense of belonging resulting from participation in community is clearly the answer, but Americans are not choosing to join existing groups.

Therefore, many of us are alone: bowling alone, dining alone, seeking truth and justice alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Buck and Brian Hardwick, "A sense of belonging is what drives well-being—and it's disappearing." FastCompany.com, 08-18-21

#All of us know how it feels to be the outsider. We also know how it feels to belong to a group, a community. How to go about achieving the feeling of belonging is not, however, entirely clear in a reality dominated by flashing screens and the constant message that individualism leads to the American Shangri-La.

### **Think Small!**

After looking into the accumulating research, one is tempted to shout, “Just go join something already! Even if you don’t want to!”

But . . . join what?

After all, people are maddening creatures: difficult and annoying creatures.

#One incentive for joining a group of human beings is that the group has some purpose or outcome that we ourselves identify with or agree with. But, the complaints are true: many groups spend more time on planning potlucks or maintaining buildings than on changing the world.

#Groups also often spend most of their time demonstrating why they are not like other groups. I’m a humanist. I join humanist groups. Those groups, however, often disappoint because their chief focus appears to be finding ways to not be like religious groups.

#Negative definition makes sense, but negative definition doesn’t make for a long term, satisfying communal group to be part of. For many of us, the question “What are we going to hate this week?” is not much in the way of glue.

#Humanists spend a lot of time being not religious; Unitarian Universalists spend a lot of time being not secular. Both groups spend a lot of time protesting—or should I say “anti-testing”—rather than attesting.

#Joining for negative reasons doesn’t lead to the positive effects that joining into community can provide.

I’m reminded of the old labor-rights song in The Little Red Songbook (to be sang to the tune of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”):

They divide us by our color;

they divide us by our tongue,  
 They divide us men and women;  
 they divide us old and young,  
 But they'll tremble at our voices,  
 when they hear these verses sung,  
 For the Union makes us strong!

Perhaps you are not prepared to join the International Workers of the World. However, most politically, socially, and religiously liberal people can sign onto the sentiments expressed in the song—it's the old saw about building bridges rather than building walls.

#Bridge building is what liberals do. It's what makes us liberal. For liberals, dividing people based on old prejudices just isn't acceptable.

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam talks a lot about two functions of community: bonding and bridging.

Some groups bond over similarities, closing out difference—humanists or Unitarian Universalists are not Christians because . . . .

Other groups bridge across the obvious differences in order to reach deeper connection—humanists, Unitarian Universalist, Christians, Muslims, *et cetera*, joining together to solve homelessness, for example.

#Sure, bonding over similarities is considerably easier than bridging across differences. Which is why we must keep trying.

#That is what we, here, at First Unitarian Society, are doing. Bridging. That is I believe what we are called to do:

. . . if it's true we are alone,  
 we are alone together . . .

## Part Two: Balance—the Moving Mover

#Western thinkers have long searched for the “unmoved mover,” meaning . . . some sort of god, or, at the least, something solid that is changeless, unlike . . . well, all of the reality that we actually observe.

#The concept was that, given all the movement in our cosmos, surely there is something *outside and beyond* it that set it all in motion. Something unmoved and unmoving. Something solid to hold onto.

#The search has been for a “still point in a turning world,” as the poet T.S. Eliot phrased it. That point would be the holy place, the sacred spot. The *omphalos*, or “navel,” or “belly-button” sought in ancient religious views.

#Human religions have generally focused on finding stability. Focused on finding an island in the storm of human reality. About finding stability through finding that belly-button—center of stability—and staring at it!

But scientific inquiry teaches us there is another way. The way of our cosmos as we now know it to be: there is no up or down; no over or under; no center, no edge. There is no un-moved mover, no still point of the turning world.

No, all the movers are moving; all the points are turning. Everything . . . everything is moving! Spinning. Changing.

That is reality!

#The monotheistic religions attempted to destroy the older human understanding that everything is a cycle, a circle. The monotheisms attempted to establish a static creator above and outside the moving world that we experience.

But all that was imagination. I would say *misplaced* imagination.

#The philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (flourished in the 500s BCE) stood apart, saying that the creative element among the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—is fire, the ever-changing, ever-creating and ever-destroying element. No, we can never step into the same river twice—the water is different; we ourselves are different every time. The only constant is change.

## Loving the Moiling

#Why imagine a counter-factual, static cosmos when the moiling, roiling, churning one we see is so beautiful and so filled with potential?

#Many have asked in desperation, Where is the foundation of truth and knowledge? Like the belief that the earth has four corners or that four pillars hold it up, the foundations of human truth and knowledge, too, float in space.

#Foundations. Anchors. Ways to nail things down. Ways to be sure of this or that—they don't exist, and that's just fine with many of us, as we enjoy being along for the ride.

#Fixity. Surety. Firm foundations. Those are the stuff of right-wing religion. Of fascism, both religious and political—pre-packaged, shrink-wrapped, stultifying.

#The search for an un-moved mover is the search for sameness, uniformity. Conformity.

#In our time, the danger of falling into metaphysical confusion and illusion is too great. This is no longer a parlor game. We must not make the mistakes so many of our ancestors did. The earth is not static. The cosmos is not static. Nothing is unmoved; nothing does not turn. That's OK. It's only that we must remember and act accordingly.

The contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nail phrased it considerably better than I can when he wrote recently:

We can no longer believe the old story that humans are moving around on a relatively static earth. Instead, we are being forced to confront the fact that the earth is an entangled meshwork of moving cycles and systems in which humans are one part. As the earth is losing its balance, we are all witnessing the movements we did not see before. Much as if we knocked over a dozen plates spinning perfectly on pegs, the destruction dramatically reveals how much motion was previously at work and the danger of messing it up.

We used to talk about "geological time" as if it were a process so slow it was imperceptible. Today, we are witnessing before our eyes the earth sinking into the sea and forests transforming into deserts. In addition, we are seeing the creation of entirely new geological strata made of plastic, chicken bones, and other garbage that will remain in the fossil record and affect geological

formations for thousands of years. The Anthropocene, more than any other transformation, is awakening large portions of humanity to the realization that we have never lived in a static or intrinsically stable world. Holocene stability has been a product of exquisitely balanced moving systems.<sup>2</sup>

End quote.

*#That* is the call of this changing season. That is the call of the time in which we live: to love the fire; to love the flowing river; to love our fellow human beings for who and what they are; to love and care for living things and our planet.

Thomas Nail has it right: there is no un-moved mover, only the beauty of moving systems “exquisitely balanced.” In this season of change and the balance of dark and light, that exquisite balance is our goal and our home.

## SOURCES

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Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, “Belonging.”

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nail, “Movement.” *The Philosopher*. <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/the-new-basics-movement>