

Belonging and Contributing
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 27, 2019

Several sermons would be needed to explore and delve into all of the important issues contained in the poem Janet just shared with us. I am sorry to say that I didn't have time this past week to write several sermons. So I hope you will be content with just a single sermon this morning.

As I begin this single sermon, I would ask us all to consider how the poem we just heard specifically relates to the topic of this morning's sermon title, Belonging and Contributing. Issues related to belonging and contributing run throughout it. The first two stanzas let us know that the author, Naomi Shahib Nye, belongs, at least temporarily, at gate 4-A. We also learn she belongs to a cultural group that speaks a language other than the dominant language of this country. The third stanza tells us how the author began to contribute. "I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly." With that one line, there is a dramatic shift in the tone of the poem. The scene shifts from one of disconnection and chaos, to one of connection, support and cooperation. From that point on, the poem elicits feelings that I typically think of as very positive and uplifting—feelings such as caring, compassion, hope and joy. These feelings are very different than what the initial lines of the poem suggest. Let's hear the first several lines of the poem again to get a sense of what I am talking about here.

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, (clearly there is no caring, compassion, hope or joy in that line)
I heard the announcement:
If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic,
Please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. (Here we find both anxiety and anticipation)
An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,
Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. (There is a hint of caring here but the predominant emotions seem to be intense sorrow or even grief.)
Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her
Problem? we told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she
Did this. (Some panic and dismay here it would seem.)

As I stated just a moment ago, in the next line the tone of the poem takes a dramatic shift. And what causes that shift? The contribution the author voluntarily and willingly makes. She offers physical comfort by putting her arm around the woman. Then she speaks in the language the woman understands. The contribution the author makes is possible because of the sense of belonging she feels with, as well as the sense of belonging she conveys to, the older woman she then befriends. I don't know about you, but I find this poem very moving.

You might be wondering, however, what this poem has to do with us. The poem seems to be about something that is far away and what some people would consider foreign. It might seem that way at first glance. I would suggest however that it speaks directly to us, particularly as we begin our annual pledge drive. It speaks to us because, to one degree or another, each of us belong here, in this Fellowship. And every one of us contributes to it, even if it is only contributing our presence here this morning. As the poem points out, the contributions of everyone present matters. There were many people present at gate 4-A that day, and each contributed something to the author's sense of community at poem's end.

For those of you who are new to the Fellowship it might be beneficial for me to provide some information about the annual pledge drive. Every year at about this time we ask members and friends of the congregation to fill out and turn in a pledge form. On that pledge form there is a place to

indicate an amount of money you are willing to commit to giving the congregation in the coming year. The pledges we receive typically constitute approximately 90% of our annual operating funds. That means the pledges we receive from you determine what the budget for the coming year will include. Last year 90 pledges were made during the annual drive. In the coming weeks you will hear considerably more about this year's pledge drive. Upcoming Sunday services will include someone speaking about the reasons they feel compelled to financially contribute to this congregation. And soon, printed information will be provided in the form of a pledge packet. All members will get one of these packets and so will anyone else who requests one. I encourage you to listen to and read carefully the material that will be shared. And if you have questions, please ask them. The front-line people I would encourage you to direct your questions to are members of the Fellowship who have volunteered to work on the pledge drive this year. They are Peg Wherry, Jo Ann Troxel, Elizabeth Rose and Louise Corbin. I would invite them to stand if they are present this morning. And if you aren't able to connect with one of these people, feel free to bring your questions to me or to a Board member. Would the Board members who are present today please stand. Thank you.

The annual pledge drive is very important. Without it, we wouldn't be able to pay staff, we wouldn't be able to fund programs, and we wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage on this building. In other words, much of what we do, as well as where we gather each week, wouldn't be possible. That said, not everyone makes a financial pledge each year. Some people simply don't have enough money to make a pledge. Others may choose to support the congregation by putting money in the offering plate on Sunday mornings. We appreciate and are grateful to everyone who gives a financial contribution to the Fellowship.

The annual pledge drive isn't the only way people contribute. People also contribute time, talents and energy to this Fellowship. And just like the money that is pledged and given, the contributions of other resources that people give make what we do possible. Earlier in the service we heard Mariah Rundberg share about how she has been contributing time, talents and energy in the work she is involved in. And a bit later in the service Mattie Whitehouse will share with us about how she contributes through her involvement with a committee she has been on for years. Without people like Mariah and Mattie very little would get done around here. To give us all a sense of what the kind of contribution I am talking about looks like, I would like to ask everyone here who is currently serving on a committee to stand. Now, if there are people here who are currently on a task force or a working group, would you please stand. And finally, anyone who has ever been on a UUFB committee, task force, working group or has volunteered time, talent and/or energy to a project, would you please stand. Look around. These people make what goes on in this Fellowship possible. That includes this service and the building it is being held in.

It is important for me to mention here that I am not suggesting that one way of contributing is better than the other. Both types of contribution, financial as well as time, talent and energy, are essential to the long-term well-being of this congregation. Without both we wouldn't be able to function very well, if at all.

I want to return now to the poem and how it relates to this Fellowship. I believe that all of us want to feel like we belong, whether that is in an airport, in a church, in our community or in any other group of people we find ourselves. And my experience has taught me again and again what Naomi Shahib Nye points out in her poem. When a person's sense of belonging is affirmed they seek to find ways to contribute to the community they are a part of. As people seek and find ways to contribute, the bonds of belonging expand and the community has the opportunity to move beyond its fears, its misconceptions and its prejudices to become more open and welcoming. Then feelings such as caring, compassion, hope and joy begin to ripple out in all directions, not just within the community but beyond it as well.

From my studies into religious traditions, it seems to me that this is an essential element of what many of the great spiritual teachers have been telling us for centuries. First, that we all belong—or as the title of our first hymn this morning asserts, "We Would Be One." In fact, we are all one. We all belong to the same human family. And next, because we are all one and we all "belong," the great teachers advise us to do all we can to be concerned for and contribute to the well-being of others.

When we do so our sense of belonging grows wider, deeper and more profound. Life takes on new meaning and our sense of purpose is affirmed and strengthened.

With all of the distressing things that are happening in our country and around the world today, we might be tempted to pull back, to limit how much we reach out beyond our comfort zone. Doing so limits the places we will find where we can and do belong. It also limits where we can contribute and make a positive difference. Instead of pulling back, I want to encourage us to move beyond what is familiar to us—to seek ways and places we might otherwise have avoided, both here in this Fellowship and in the larger world. Maybe there is a committee, a task force or a working group in this congregation that you have been wondering about. Or maybe there is some task you have thought of that needs doing. Share your curiosity or your idea with someone. And maybe there is someone you don't know and haven't felt comfortable approaching, either here or beyond this community. Consider taking a small step, such as just saying hello and offering a smile. Contributions come in all sizes and in many forms. You never know what might happen by taking one small step. As an example, I would have us hear again the end of the poem.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought,
This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped
—has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.
This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

So it is and so shall it be.