

“Nurturing Relationships During a Pandemic”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 3, 2021

Since early 2019, UUFB has been utilizing materials from an organization called “Soul Matters” to plan theme based worship and religious education each month. The Soul Matters team, along with congregational leaders across the country, select the themes each year. Cultivating relationship is the theme that was chosen for this month. My first thought upon reading that theme title was, how do you possibly cultivate relationships in the midst of a pandemic. It took only a matter of seconds for me to realize that my question needed to be transformed into the topic of my first sermon this month.

As I sat with my initial thought, the question changed. The word “cultivate” was replaced by the word “nurture.” It seems to me that many, if not all of us, are wondering how we nurture many of the relationships in our lives as we attempt to keep ourselves and others healthy and even alive. I would like to claim that I have been gifted with wisdom in regards to this question. But truth be told, I struggle with this question as much as anyone else. I hope that by sharing my thoughts and my struggles on this issue it may offer all of us an opening to explore how we might learn and grow together.

As I sat with the last sentence in the reading Susan just shared with us it soon shifted, just as the first question I had about the theme, cultivating relationships, shifted. The reading ends with “We make the choice to stay stuck together even when we don’t want to be in the same room...” I imagine there may have been some times prior to COVID when one or more of us didn’t want to be in the same room together, although I imagine those times were few and far between. Since the arrival of COVID, however, there has been good reason for us not to want to be in the same room together. The reason was that we wanted to protect ourselves, as well as others, from contracting the virus. Since COVID arrived in Montana, many of us wish we could safely make the choice to be in the same room with one another again. Today, we make the choice to stay stuck together even when we can’t safely be in the same room.

As we continue to make the choice to stay together through various means, we nurture relationships with members and friends of the Fellowship. Staying together has not been easy. In fact, it has been very challenging. The ongoing spread of the COVID virus has created all kinds of limitations that we have needed to face and deal with. Here is an example of one of the limitations we have faced. Since the last Sunday in March, 2020, we have only been able to gather for a service in our building on 7 out of 80 Sundays. That is less than one Sunday out of eleven, or less than one Sunday every two and a half months. Yet in spite of not being able to meet in our building for 73 of those Sundays, we have found ways to continue to provide the opportunity for members and friends to engage with services. One example is that we held four services outdoors at Bozeman Pond during that time frame. And for many of the Sundays we didn’t meet in the building, we found a way to have a post-service social time on Zoom where we could converse with one another.

Zoom is just one of the technologies we have utilized in our efforts to connect and nurture relationships. The Fellowship has also used Facebook live and more recently, including today, YouTube to allow people to attend our services. Any and all of these technologies, while helpful during these challenging times, are substantially less satisfying than being able to meet person-to-person in the same physical space. These technologies just don’t provide what some people need. And others are unable to use one or all of these technologies for one reason or another. Technologies such as the ones I mentioned have offered us opportunities to connect and nurture relationships, although not as well as we might want.

I imagine many of you may have used technologies such as these to connect with people you know and care about. I can offer a personal example from my own life. My older sister and I figured out a way for my 97 year old mother, who is in a nursing home, to connect with us on Zoom using a tablet computer. During the course of this pandemic we have sought ways to connect that, while less satisfying than being in-person, allow us to hear and see people in real-time.

Here at the Fellowship we have planned a number of in-person events outdoors in an effort to address people's need to get together. Last year we had gatherings where folks brought camp chairs to the parking lot where we sat and talked about whatever was on peoples' hearts and minds. This spring we had an Easter egg event. This involved a number of people from the Fellowship, including children from our religious education program, delivering Easter eggs and goodies to members and friends of the congregation who were unable to get out much. Just last month we held a garden exchange. And as you will see in today's written announcements, on October 17th the Fellowship will be hosting a labyrinth walk.

When meeting in-person or over the internet hasn't been practical or possible, we have reached out to members and friends in ways that today may be considered old-school. Not long after the pandemic was declared and the Governor issued a shelter in place order, a phone tree was created and used to contact as many Fellowship members and friends as possible. The members of the Caring Committee, along with the Hospitality and Membership Committee, put the phone tree together and did a significant amount of calling. And the Caring Committee has continued its long-held practice of sending cards to acknowledge important moments or events in a person's life.

Sending something such as a card or a letter through the mail is definitely old-school, and yet it can be an important way of nurturing a relationship with someone we care about. I imagine that sending a letter or a card through the mail may have been one of the few options that was available during the 1918 influenza pandemic. I find it interesting that the first identified case of what was referred to in the press back then as the Spanish Flu was in Kansas. But I digress. The point I want to make here is that we have many more options for connecting and nurturing relationships today than people who lived through the pandemic of the early 1900's. So while we are struggling with the limitations the pandemic is forcing on us, it would be beneficial for us to be thankful for the options and the opportunities we enjoy today.

During this pandemic our Fellowship has also sought to nurture relationships beyond our congregation. We continue to support Family Promise and volunteer to provide meals when and how we can. We continue to volunteer at and support Fork and Spoon Café, the pay-as-you-can restaurant that feeds anyone and everyone. Last year we donated over \$5,000 to Fork and Spoon when there was some doubt about whether the restaurant would be able to keep its doors open. We continue to be actively involved with the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association and the efforts it is working on in the community. For the past couple of years one of those efforts has focused on Housing First Village, a project of HRDC. Housing First Village will soon provide a number of tiny homes for homeless people in the area. Our Fellowship raised over \$2,200 in support of this project. The total donation from all of the religious communities in the county was over \$139,000. By working together, religious communities will provide a stable home for people who otherwise would be sleeping outdoors for most of the year. Working together with other religious communities in areas, and on projects, where there are shared values is yet another example of nurturing relationships.

So far I have focused mainly on how the Fellowship, as an organization, has sought to nurture relationships during this pandemic. But I know that many of us have sought to nurture the relationships in our lives over the past 18 months. Nurturing relationships through the course of this pandemic has been, and continues to be, a daunting challenge. The challenge has been, and continues to be, one that we strive to face and address as best we possibly can. As I indicated earlier, I have not been gifted with great wisdom about how to nourish relationships during a pandemic. If I had been granted such wisdom I would be preaching it from the rooftops, or maybe in the parking lot at the local Walmart, for all to hear. Yet while I don't have any great wisdom, I do know that nourishing relationships is as important now—let me correct that and say, it is even more important now—than prior to the first case of COVID.

At some point this pandemic, like the 1918 influenza pandemic, will be over. When it is, we will need to figure out how to live in a post-pandemic world. We won't be able to return to life as it was before. Many things will be different about our post-pandemic lives than they were just two years ago. I am certain, however, that one thing won't change. Once the pandemic is over, relationships will still be important to us. Relationships won't just be important, they will be essential for our wellbeing and for our very existence. I believe that is as true now as it was during and after the 1918 influenza pandemic or any other pandemic in

human history. It is estimated that there were about 675,000 people in the U.S and 50 million people worldwide who died as a result of the 1918 pandemic. In this country, we have already surpassed the death toll of that pandemic. It is quite likely that the world will surpass the 50 million deaths mark within a matter of weeks.

The survivors of the 1918 pandemic had to rebuild their lives, and many of their relationships, just as we will need to do. The world we live in today was made possible by those who survived the influenza pandemic. The valiant and successful efforts to rebuild relationships by the survivors of that pandemic provide a model for us today. Those survivors found ways to carry on, just as we will need to find ways to carry on. The generations who will come after us will build upon the foundation we establish, or reestablish, as we emerge from the pandemic we are in the midst of. It is my hope that we are willing and able to nourish the relationships that will allow us to stabilize our pandemic battered communities. It is my hope that we will continue to seek and find ways to reach out to, and connect with, those who need us, as well as those who can support and encourage us throughout the course of this pandemic and beyond.

So may it be.