



SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Wired Together

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, October 13, 2019

At age 15 I was a troubled youth. Hair down to my shoulders, I liked to hang with my best friend and smoke pot and play pranks on passing motorists. My grades reflected my troubles, Cs, Ds and an occasional B- in English Class. My mother was really worried. Although she worried a lot anyway. I had one teacher I liked, Mr. Gluck, who taught English. He saw what was happening to me and called my mother. "I think John would do better elsewhere" he told her, "perhaps a different social environment where he felt a deeper connection to his peers. He is just too withdrawn to do well in this large public school." This was something unusual for a public school teacher to say to a parent, especially my parents who were strong advocates of public education, my father, after all worked for the NY State Department of Education.

I remember my parents arguing about this late at night. My father was certain this was just a phase (although he was expelled from High School, for flooding the first floor classrooms by stuffing up the second floor sinks. He actually never graduated from high school but somehow got into Yale). My mother, who had run away from home at 16 and put herself through high school and college, thought Mr. Gluck was right. As usual, my mother won and the next fall, I was enrolled in a private school in the rolling hills of Eastern PA known for its artistic potential and one that required the students to work off some of their tuition.

Those first days at the Solebury School in New Hope, PA were miserable. To say I was homesick would be a vast understatement. I had been pulled away from the only social network I had, as dysfunctional as it was, and thrust into a community of bright and eager

kids, most of whom seemed to be friends with each other. I would sit for hours at the end of the long oak lined drive staring out into the countryside.

It was a teacher who saw me, John Brown, who would later become Head of school. He was tall, strong and funny. He taught history, a class I would later ace and from which I scored high marks on advanced AP tests. John would just sit with me, our backs to the oak trees and talk about his own loneliness as a youth. Eventually, I got up and began to connect with other kids. As those years progressed I became deeply involved in that small community. Indeed, some of the most powerful lessons of my life were learned there. I graduated second in my class.

What was it that eventually shook me from my malaise? What is it that draws us out of our deepest moments of loneliness?

The answer is simple: Other people. It turns out that we are wired to need other people to see us, value us and share their lives with us. It turns out that we are evolutionarily adapted to need other people in our lives. In fact, says neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman and others, intragroup cooperation is what has made us the most intelligent and adaptive species on the planet. Other animals use tools, have language and work cooperatively but only humans are able to do this on a massive scale, enough to make art, play symphonies, build pyramids and create cities. (See Wired: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect, 2017)

Moreover, it is our need for others that actually wires us together in communities like this one; we literally cannot survive physically, emotionally or spiritually without one another, save for the occasional hermit or schizophrenic who have created a psychological community with variations of themselves.

“Why is loneliness so painful? Why do we care how others treat us? And, why do we spend so much time perseverating on past and future relationships?” While we were

taught that the sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me, the truth is that names and social rejection can be even more powerful than physical pain. The loss of our community or a loved one releases as much of the stress hormone cortisol as a broken arm. (Ibid Wired)

Why is shunning such a powerful punishment? Why is solitary confinement so cruel? Why is loneliness the number one cause of clinical depression? Because we need one another at the very place of where the spirit meets the bone.

It is well known fact that widowers face the greatest risk of dying in the first few months after their partner's death. Statistically, women fare better after the loss of our a longtime mate, in large part, because they tend to have social networks in place that help them weather their grief and find new meaning to life.

Attachment theory is the study of how and why we connect socially. What we know now is that the price we pay for being so successful socially is that we crave social acceptance and belonging to a group at the very base of our limbic brain. (Ibid Wired) We literally need other people to like and those who don't are sociopathic, not able to empathize or feel for another. When Sally Field won her Oscar in 1985 she said, "you like me, you really, really like me". And everyone laughed. We all remember being left out of game, or being the last one chosen for a team. I imagine you can feel that pain even now that I mention it can't you?

As a species our greatest fear, second only to dying, is the fear of public speaking. Why? Because we are afraid people will think less of us if we make a mistake. Those of us who do a lot of public speaking know that we can't think of the mistakes we will make, or even how we look, because if we did, we would lose the courage to go on. It helps though, as one wise colleague taught me years ago, to remember that beyond a momentary judgment or two, most people in the audience don't really care what you said or how you looked, because what we all really care about is ourselves. It's a humbling realization. It

used to be said among ministers that we are only as good as our last sermon but even that's a stretch. Most of you won't remember what I talked about by tomorrow, which is not to say it didn't have any effect, you just won't remember what jokes I made or what tie I wore, but you will remember how I made you feel.

Belonging to a community like this one is, at some level, quite literally a matter of life and death. People don't often understand why other people join congregations, that is, until they need one. More than once I have had someone tell me that they were quite peripheral to the congregation until a loved one died and then they were surrounded by love. While we can be spiritual alone, spirituality is far more effective when we do it together and especially with people we know. Yoga classes, small discussion groups, advocacy groups, support groups, sports clubs, congregations, and the most successful religion in America Alcoholics Anonymous are all examples of how we find meaning together.

Belonging together is, strangely, what gives us the strength to be truly ourselves. As Brene Brown puts it:

“Belonging so fully to yourself that you're willing to stand alone is a wilderness—an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared. The wilderness can often feel unholy because we can't control it, or what people think about our choice of whether to venture into that vastness or not. But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand.” (From [Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone](#))

Peter Block in his book [The Structure of Belonging](#), says that the “sense of community is the core of a strong organization. In a day and age where overload is the norm, time and commitment is rare and valuable. Individuals will not give of their time and commitment easily. The sense of belonging is key...” That key is not just how we like being around one another, it's about what we do to make meaning together, especially in this crazy upside

down world. And a large part of that meaning making is making joy out of struggles. Through this music, through our children, through each other. When we practice belonging together we are being spiritual.

When we practice that meaning making together, what I call spiritual practice, we find it lasts longer and is far more satisfying. Why else would hundreds of people come together at a Buddhist retreat or sing hymns or pray in a Mosque if not to reinforce the power of our wiring together? After all, the meditation or prayer or hymn is ostensibly about you and your relationship with God, right? Why do it together? Because it is like an amplification of our heart, a beating together of the same savage impulse, that hunger for the hum of life,

*“Gathered here in the mystery of the hour
Gathered here in one strong body
Gathered here in the struggle and the power
Spirit Draw Near” (#389)*

Can you hear me on this?

So beloveds, if we are stronger together than apart, what is it that keeps us together? What is the actual wiring that holds us to one another? In most other religious traditions, that wiring is faith. The belief and action we take on what we consider most important, in other words faith. In other religions, faith is largely prescribed by doctrine and practice. In ours, this free faith, we are encouraged to form that faith based on our own lives, mutually supported in that journey by each other. So faith is more a result of being a UU but not the wiring that holds us together. The wiring in our religion is covenant.

What is a covenant? It’s an old word meaning mutual promise. There are different kinds of covenants that wire us together. The covenant of purpose we say each week, say it with me again Love is the spirit of this church....

Our mission statement to inspire connect and act is also a covenant of purpose. But there are other covenants that hold us together. One is this one, the Covenant of Right Relations which our congregation passed a few years ago. It's now in this beautiful frame thanks to Rob Zuckerman. Let me read it you. You should read it on your own; it will be hanging in the foyer.

This covenant reminds us of how we want to belong to each other here. It reminds us of our better selves. We are welcome to call one another back into that covenant when necessary. Stopping a meeting to breathe deeply and perhaps read it again.

Finally, my friends, we are wired together by what we do in the world, our ministry. In some ways, all of us are ministers. The work we do to care for one another, the chaplains, the worship associates, the many groups and teams that make our lives meaning full here are wired into this beloved community.

Every year there is a group of people you elect as a congregation, to help me lead you into the covenant of practice that make us UUs. They are the Committee on Ministries. Would the COM please stand up: Sudha Sankar, Chair, Chuck Harrington, Jenna Jacobs, Joanne Glasser Orenstein, and Randy Burnham. These fine people help us remain wired to one another. They assess how effective our ministry is, they let me know of issues that need attention, they are here to hear your concerns and act on them, and they help with managing our covenant of right relations, especially as it pertains to conflict.

Because the fact of any community of people is that there will be conflict. Conflict is necessary for a community of diversity to interact and refocus on what matter most. It is the natural heat of our wiring. When it becomes too great, the COM helps to manage that conflict to a better place. The Covenant Of Right Relations is one part of that calling back.

Human beings often learn from their mistakes, albeit slowly. We learn even faster when we do it together. That is why we are covenantal, to remind ourselves of the bigger reasons we are alive and together. Bigger than who takes out the garbage, bigger than who wins the game, bigger than politics, and bigger than our struggles to look better, fit in, stop crying, cease wanting for something other than what is.

We are wired together to belong together and entertain the angels of our better nature. Let me close with this piece from the Irish Poet and former priest John O'Donohue who died in his sleep at age 52 at the height of creative power, a man who once belonged to the Catholic Faith, who when forced to leave, found a community of poets who gave him a different kind of faith:

“May you listen to your longing to be free. May the frames of your belonging be large enough for the dreams of your soul. May you arise each day with a voice of blessing whispering in your heart that something good is going to happen to you. May you find a harmony between your soul and your life. May the mansion of your soul never become a haunted place. May you know the eternal longing which lives at the heart of time. May there be kindness in your gaze when you look within. May you never place walls between the light and yourself. May your angel free you from the prisons of guilt, fear, disappointment, and despair. May you allow the wild beauty of the invisible world to gather you, mind you, and embrace you into belonging.” ([Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections On Our Yearning To Belong](#), 1999) Amen.