

Unity Church of North Easton

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Dr. Andrew Tripp, Coordinator of Ministry

The Epidemic of Loneliness

Prior to the pandemic, Americans were struggling with loneliness. You are probably familiar with Robert Putnam's classic, *Bowling Alone*, where in the year 2000 he argued for the growing isolation and social decay of the American fabric. I know Jim Baker works with the Lion's Club, and my grandfather had been a regular member of the Rotary Club, look at the greying membership of such organizations, of the Kiwanis Club, of Masonic Lodges, of congregational membership in America. Younger generations have less affiliation with voluntary associations than preceding generations. In social scientific research from 2017, people found one of the reasons Donald Trump won the presidential campaign is because he gave people in rural America an identity and a sense of community that had been lacking through the Bush and Clinton years of the White House.

Much like our present conditions, Florida reeling from Hurricane Helene, being then hit with Hurricane Milton, America was hit with loneliness and then the pandemic happened with social distancing and social isolation making us even more fragmented. I was working in psych at the start of the pandemic and saw the first few cases of suicidality come in from the people laid off at the very beginning. Once the lockdown began, I had returned to hospice and saw families not be able to be with their dying loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes. We were disconnected from one another and from ourselves. I saw the healthcare heroes signs but I also know about the massive layoffs from hospital systems and nurses who weren't emergency room, ICU, or home health nurses experienced a vastly different time from those in the high-need settings. We claimed healthcare heroes but notice how those of us who were on the front lines received no external reward for our labor, and how some groups in America mocked the need for masks, social distancing, vaccination, and felt entitled to act however they wanted without regard for

their fellow citizens. I remember how America failed the first responders to the twin towers falling on September 11th, how America failed the front line of the COVID pandemic, how even now armed militias in the south are attacking and harassing FEMA efforts when the organization exists as disaster relief.

Social decay.

I've seen more than one argument in support of mass violence, where once again rural America feels unheard, unsupported, and attacked. For all that America likes to pride itself as being the nation that fought against fascism, we have a good chunk of willing participants in fascism today. Anger, fear, isolation, these lead to dehumanization. I'm not only out of touch with others, I become out of touch with my own humanity, leading to monstrous decisions where ethics and morals are suspended.

There is another strain of American culture, the one of connection and assembly. When Alexis de Tocqueville came to study America and write on the genius of its democracy, he focused in on the way Americans formed voluntary associations for all sorts of causes. From abolition to suffrage to temperance to antipoverty and educational efforts, Americans were constantly making associations. Such associations were critical for society, in de Tocqueville's words:

When citizens can associate only in certain cases, they regard association as a rare and singular process, and they hardly think of it.

When you allow them to associate freely in everything, they end up seeing in association the universal and, so to speak, unique means that people can use to attain the various ends that they propose. Each new need immediately awakens the idea of association. The art of association then becomes, as I said above, the mother science; everyone studies it and applies it.

By coming together in community we see our neighbor's struggle, and they see ours. We work together and organize together for our mutual aid and benefit. When Jim Baker works the thrift store for the Lions, it isn't so they can get rich, it is so they can raise funds for their philanthropic purposes, most specifically for their work providing vision access for those in need. When someone who can't afford glasses is suddenly gifted with proper corrective

lenses, their whole world changes and so much opens up to them. Literally their life is changed.

It gets at an important truth. We need each other. Those heart-wrenching Jimmy Fund commercials at the movie theaters are important because those kids need the best care possible for their chance to recover from cancer. Organizing and association formation is not always on controversial topics. Kids deserve quality healthcare. Those with vision problems deserve corrective lenses. People hit by disasters deserve relief. The politization of FEMA boggles my mind. When I was growing up in Northern NY, we had a few major ice storms that necessitated FEMA aid. People along the Black River who experienced flooding had aid with temporary housing, financial support, and community warming centers. On more than one occasion my childhood's home had its basement flooded as the ice melted from the storms leading to a massive runoff. Volunteer firefighters from downstate went up to Northern NY to assist in pumping out the water. It's been 26 years since that last ice storm and I remember the names of Vic, Lou, Alex, and Paul from Mineola, a town on Long Island, who pumped out our basement. There was no power to run the several sump pumps, and the water was higher than the breaker box so electricity would have been unsafe if power was restored, so we literally were dependent on others for the safety of our home.

For those of us in the free church tradition, church itself is a voluntary association. No one forces you to come here on Sunday morning. No one in the Unitarian Universalist tradition would claim your soul is in peril if you aren't in a pew come Sunday. You are under no obligation to be here. You are here because you want to be here. Because community provides you with something, where the laughs of Greg and the diligence of Ellen and the warmth of Linda make your day, your week, just a little bit brighter. Where you feel a bit less alone. I was an odd duck, having been a regular church goer as a single man of 22. I've shared before it was the anniversary of September 11th that brought me back to church. I had been feeling isolated and alone, with friends having been activated and sent to the GWOT between Iraq and Afghanistan, while my year at Lockheed had attacked my confidence in the military-industrial complex. As a lifelong NPR listener, it was on the radio as I drove to church, and there was a gospel music hour on every Sunday for that

drive time. The show ended with the same song week in and week out, Hezekiah Walker's *I Need You to Survive*. Linda, would you mind playing a few bars?

In 2002 it wasn't music you would hear in many UU congregations but the song spoke to me as I drove.

Fourteen years later I was not expecting for the song to be featured at our General Assembly. The head of music for that General Assembly, Dr. Glen Rideout, prefaced the song with these words:

As we endeavor to be a community together, affirming the worth and dignity of black lives, we must enter the songs of black lives with humility. We must endeavor consciously to resist the temptation to colonize it with changes that make us more comfortable inside of it. If we can be present to black faith and black faiths then in solidarity we might enter in to the blessed relationship that allows us to deserve to be called allies. In this sense sing this song with me with curiosity, with humility, and with joined faith.

He was on stage with the GA choir and my friend, Elandria Williams. You may remember Elandria as our association's moderator, a former member of the Highlander Research and Education Center, and leader of DRUUMM. In 2016 Elandria was using a rolling walker for mobility, E's body having a legacy of illness and debility even though she was still just 36 years old. Despite E's physical debilities, you could see that smile on E's face and in E's eyes as GA sang that song.

Elandria was a lifelong UU, but also had a deep connection with the black church. E would challenge other UU young adults at gatherings who would say it wasn't a Christian church, and they would respond saying it certainly wasn't Hindu or Jewish, that the language was church, but we drew the circle wider to invite people in. Including our Christian siblings was as important as including our Muslim and Humanist siblings, our Jewish and Buddhist UUs. We don't ask our Jewish UU family why we can't bring bacon to a Passover seder, and we don't tell our Buddhist UU family they don't have to keep going on and on about the Buddha, so why do we roll our eyes and change the words when our Christian, especially our Black Church Christian UUs bring their music into

the service. That's a culture of control and oppression, not inclusion and relationship. Linda, could you please once again give us the intro to the song?

I need you, you need me
We're all a part of God's body
Stand with me, agree with me
We're all a part of God's body
It is God's will that every need be supplied
You are important to me, I need you to survive

I pray for you.

You pray for me.

I love you.

I need you to survive.

I won't harm you with words from my mouth.

I love you.

I need you to survive.

What does this kind of prayer and love look like? In my own life, I held up tablets so spouses could facetime their beloved who was in a hospital or nursing home during the lockdown of the pandemic. That tablet was an act of prayer. I know one widow who had done all she could to keep her husband with profound Parkinson's home, out of facilities, because she knew with his compromised health that he wouldn't survive a COVID infection. His care needs eventually exceeded what she could provide at home, and she had to make the painful decision for him to be in a nursing home. She was not allowed in to visit, and a week after being admitted he was infected with COVID and a week later he was dead. Her grief at not being enough to care for him was profound, filled with anger and frustration. He had Parkinsons, was mostly nonverbal, but she needed him to know he was still cared for, was still loved, was not alone, but he did die alone. Human suffering, human tragedy. I could at least choose to be there with her in her pain. We need each other to survive. I presently have a patient with dementia, it was early onset with the diagnosis being at 58. He is now 76. That's way long since most dementias

have a 10-12 year life expectancy from diagnosis. He's nonverbal, has to be physically lifted from his hospital bed to his wheelchair and back each day. His spouse has her bed next to his hospital bed, and she'll waken some nights each week to him having held her hand. Even ravaged by Alzheimer's for 18 years, he needs to hold her hand. Love, human connection, beyond words we see the truth that you are important to me, I need you to survive.

Unlike Parkinsons and Alzheimer's, our present social decay is not a terminal diagnosis. It only takes a moment to greet your neighbor, here in the pews, out at the Dunks, celebrating Ellie the Elephant and rooting for her and perhaps the NY Liberty as well, handing out the good stuff for Halloween, helping Jim at the thrift shop, helping Easton with it's 300th, helping your elderly neighbor with their snow removal or trash to the curb. Maybe it is drawing our circle wider and inviting others in. Maybe it is thanking our friends for making us feel like this is our church home.

We have choices to make. I'm going to need you. You are going to need me. Stand with me. You are important to me. I need you to survive. We are interdependent. We are social. We are relational. Let us sustain those many ties that bind us together. The health cost, physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual, of isolation and loneliness is far too great. Our age is only fragmented, estranged, and alone if we let it be that way. Make your choices knowing I need you to survive.

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