

“On Trust”

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Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading I

Today’s first reading is from social worker, researcher, and author Brene Brown.

Funerals, in fact, are one of the most powerful examples of collective pain.

They feature in a surprising finding from my research on trust.

When I asked participants to identify three to five specific behaviors that their friends, family, and colleagues do that raise their level of trust with them, funerals always emerge in the top three responses.

Funerals matter. Showing up to them matters.

And funerals matter not just to the people grieving, but to everyone who is there. The collective pain (and sometimes joy) we experience when gathering in a way to celebrate the end of life is perhaps one of the most powerful experiences of inextricable connection.

Death, loss, and grief are the great equalizers.

Part I: On Trust

One of the many hard things about the pandemic these past few years was that we could not gather to mourn. We were so isolated in so many ways, and one way was that people died alone and people grieved alone. For a while, there were no funerals or memorials. No opportunities to celebrate a life, to feel supported and connected. No way to build trust.

Over the course of the pandemic, we lost 22 people in our OUUC community. The sheer number is breath-taking alone. For some of those we lost, we delayed our collective mourning. After a while, we were able to figure out how to mourn virtually. We learned the blessings of gathering on Zoom as people from around the world joined us online to grieve. Now, it’s just normal and expected that we stream and record celebrations of life.

As we have begun gathering in-person again, we are learning to trust each other again. Last year we had nine celebrations of life in our community. Gathering to mourn, and just gathering itself is an act of trust. And so, our spiritual theme for this month is “trust.”

There are many different ways to approach trust--trust in ourselves, trust in others, trust in something beyond us, whether you call that God, the Universe, Spirit, Love, trust in institutions, systems, society, culture. Trust is more of a cognitive assessment, “I don’t trust this situation,” and it can bring up a lot of feelings, like hurt and defensiveness. And, trust can mean different things to different people, bringing up different emotions.

Brene Brown, the author of our reading, is a researcher who has done a lot of work to understand and unpack trust. She offers these definitions from Charles Feltman’s The Thin Book of Trust. Feltman says, trust is “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.”

Distrust is “what is important to me is not safe with this person in this situation (or any situation).”

So, trust (and distrust) are about safety, vulnerability and courage.

One of the things I like about Brown is that she is very concrete; she speaks of how we can act in order to be who we want to be. Over the course of her work on how to live a whole-hearted life, Brown uncovered seven elements that develop trust, and she uses the acronym B-R-A-V-I-N-G to describe them. We’ve put some resources for more information in the order of service and in the chat, so don’t worry, you can relax and listen right now.

The B in BRAVING is for Boundaries: We respect each other’s boundaries and when we’re not sure, we ask. We are willing to say and hear “no.”

R is for Reliability: We do what we say we will do, which means being aware of our competencies and limitations, and being able to balance competing priorities.

A is for Accountability: We own our mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

V is for Vault: Keeping confidences, not sharing information that is not ours to share.

I is for Integrity: We practice our values, choose what is right over what is fast, fun, or easy. We choose courage over comfort.

N is for Nonjudgement: We can each ask for what we need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

Last, G is for Generosity: We extend the most generous interpretations possible to the intention, words and actions of each other.

So, the behaviors of trust are Boundaries, Reliability, Accountability, Vault (confidences), Integrity, Nonjudgement, and Generosity. These are the elements that build trust between us and build trust in ourselves.

I'd say those are elements of love as well. Love and trust go hand in hand.

Psychologist and researcher, John Gottman wrote that it's the small things that build love and trust. And it's the small things that rebuild trust when it's broken. Gottman even created a formula: It takes five small, positive interactions to counteract every one negative one.

When the Worship Arts team met last month and explored this theme, Alicia noted that we tend to make trust a binary—trust or mistrust. Her reflection offered some nuance to the experience of trust.

Alicia said, really, trust is a continuum and a process. It's a continuum because often we don't totally trust or mistrust; we might trust someone in some situations and not in others. For example, we might trust a 10-year-old child to empty the dishwasher but not to drive to the store. We might trust the clerk at the Department of Licensing to renew our driver's license but not to remove our appendix. And trust is a process because we build trust over time with experiences.

Over the past month or so, I've been on the lookout for trust and how it shows up in my life. One place it showed up here at OUUC was the forum on March 19 where we discussed a proposed behavioral covenant. This community has a covenant, the promises we make to each other about how we'll be together. We're discussing adding a list of 10 specific behaviors that will make our covenant more concrete.

The proposed statement that some people at the forum had the most trouble with was this: I will respect leadership's gifts, experience, knowledge, commitment, and the decisions they make on behalf of the congregation. While most people at the forum were fine with this statement,

each of the five discussion groups had a person who had an experience that caused them to question if they could live with this statement, an experience of disagreement or conflict with someone in a leadership position. People spoke about their experience with feelings of disappointment, anger, and hurt.

A few weeks later, I offered a forum on “OUUC After Covid.” In that forum I spoke about the many transitions this congregation had experienced over the years, including the shift from being a pastoral sized church to a program sized church. I noted that while the number of people attending services may go up, it’s the cultural shifts in the congregation that show whether the size transition has actually happened. It’s moving from an expectation that you will know everyone to an expectation that there will be new faces every Sunday. It’s moving from an expectation that you will know everything that is happening to knowing that there are things you won’t be involved in. It’s moving from an expectation that you will be involved in every decision to trusting that chosen leaders will make decisions in the best interest of the congregation.

As I reflected on each of these forums, I noticed that a common theme is trust. Trusting each other, trusting a process, trusting change. Since then, I have been wondering how we build and rebuild trust here.

Reading II

Our second reading is from Unitarian minister and theologian, James Luther Adams.

Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human. The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions - social, economic, and political - of the common life.

Part II: Trust as a Spiritual Practice

Each of us comes here, comes into community, with our own experiences and history of trust and mistrust. And some of us have history together; we are building history together now. And, while none of us can know the whole story of each of us, I do know that none of us can embrace the

challenge of living a whole-hearted life alone, we need trustworthy relationships and communities of support to sustain us. Communities and relationships like we aspire to provide here.

James Luther Adams said it well: church is a place where we practice being human. Then what we practice here we bring out there. If we build and practice trust here, we learn that trust is possible, and we can grow in our capacity to trust--here and elsewhere.

When I was visiting OUUC almost four years ago, I preached a sermon where I said that, if you called me to be your minister, I would disappoint you. I also said that I was less concerned about you being disappointed than what you would do with your disappointment. Four years later, I believe this now more than ever.

We all make mistakes, missteps, we hurt each other, sometimes intentionally, most often not. I don't think it's possible to get anything done in any group of people without stepping on toes sometimes. I know I have disappointed some of you. And I have also been disappointed, experiencing the feeling that others expressed at the forum a few weeks ago. What I have done with my disappointment is to call on people I trust to help me sort out what is mine, what my boundaries are and what I am responsible for, to help me remember my values, to help me see my part and if there is apology needed, and to help me remember to be generous, knowing that I understand only a small part of the whole picture.

Does trust mean that disappointment and mistakes never happen? I don't think so. I think it is possible for mistakes and trust to coexist if we make amends, stay in alignment with our values, and stay away from blame and shame. (This is from Brene Brown, too.) It's what we do with our disappointment and hurt. It doesn't mean we trust everyone all the time. It does mean that we remain courageous and vulnerable when warranted. It means that we return to actions that build trust, return to our values, and return to our covenant.

Covid has upended everything, and we are learning new ways of being. I believe a primary purpose of the church now is to provide space for us to build the skills needed to tend to our individual wholeness and to the relationships between us in times of uncertainty and transition.

One of those skills to build is trust. I think trust is a spiritual practice, how we act grounded in our deepest values. We are all here to practice together for a shared ministry that calls out the best in us and to help create the world we dream about. We're here together in our humanity, with our wounds and our gifts, knowing that sometimes those are the same thing. We show up for each other to celebrate and to mourn, encouraging each other to whole-hearted living.

In order to practice trust, we have to ask: Am I willing to be courageous and vulnerable, to open myself to the possibility of trust and true belonging?

I can't answer that question for you, only for myself. I know that in community is where my faith and hope are renewed.

Am I willing to be courageous and vulnerable, willing to build trust? That's why I'm here, disappointments and all. How about you?

For more information:

<https://brenebrown.com/videos/anatomy-trust-video/>

[Behavioral Covenant with Rev. Mary Gear - 3/19/23 After-Service Forum](#)

["OUUC After COVID" with Rev. Mary Gear - 4/2/23 After-Service Forum](#)

[Slides for after-service forum on OUUC After Covid](#)