

Trust

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The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, OR
September 23, 2007

MEDITATION: "This is How We are Called" by Kimberly Beyer-Nelson insert here?

READING: "Trust" from *The Book of Qualities*, by J. Ruth Gendler

Trust is the daughter of Truth. She has an objective memory,
neither embellishing nor denying the past.
She is an ideal confidante - gracious, candid, and discreet.
Trust talks to people who need to hear her;
she listens to those who need to be heard;
she sits quietly with those who are skeptical of words.
Her presence is subtle, simple, and undeniable.

Trust rarely buys round-trip tickets because she is never sure how long she will be gone and when she will return.
Trust is at home in the desert and the city, with dolphins and tigers, with outlaws, lovers, and saints.
When Trust bought her house, she tore out all the internal walls, strengthened the foundation, and rebuilt the door.
Trust is not fragile, but she has no need to advertise her strength.
She has a gambler's respect for the interplay between luck and skill: she is the mother of love.

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We were gathered one hundred strong in a junior high school gymnasium, with concrete walls and a gigantic rug, the local hotel conference rooms being too expensive for this particular human potential workshop. The facilitator instructed us to walk around slowly, and when he said "stop," we stopped in front of one other person. After pausing a moment, we were to hold up zero to four fingers representing our willingness to trust this person. Four fingers meant, I trust you. Three meant, I think I could trust you. Two meant, I don't know if I trust you. One meant, I don't think I trust you. Zero meant, I don't trust you.

Both people raised their hands simultaneously at the trainer's call. If both raised four fingers, they hugged. If one person raised three fingers and the other raised three or four, they shook hands. If one of them held up two fingers and the other raised two or more, they stood pat. If either of the people raised one finger, she took one step back. If either of the people raised zero fingers, signified as a fist, she turned her back on the other person.

And then, at the facilitator's call, we continued walking around, stopping in this manner about twenty times to exchange communications of trust levels with complete strangers.

After this exercise, we talked about why we trusted some people and not others. I tended to trust people who maintained eye contact. When I shared this, a former car salesman laughed and said, "That's the oldest trick in the book. Maintain eye contact, and people trust you." Years later I befriended a man who grew up in Okinawa. He didn't find eye contact to be trust-inducing at all. He found it aggressive, embarrassing. He struggled to "maintain eye contact" with European-Americans, because he knew that this was helpful, but it always felt rude to him. To him, maintaining eye contact meant staring. So one of my predominant mechanisms for determining trust has resulted in my trusting manipulative car salesmen and not trusting most Asians. Hmm.

I found the responses of the other workshop participants astonishing. Some people trusted women but not men. Some people nervously admitted that they tended to trust people of their own race but not others. All sorts of categories determined how many fingers people got: Tall people, short people, skinny people, fat people, jocks, geeks, businessmen, businesswomen, crunchy earth girls, people that remind you of your mother, or your father, people who look successful, attractive people, nice eyes, blue eyes, Latinos, whites, folksy people, people whose odor you can smell, people who smile, people who seem to be shining it on too much.

All of these are categories that we carry around with us arising from our personal histories, familial and cultural influence. They determine, in a workshop such as this, whether one will raise a hand with one, two, three, or four fingers, or a fist, and in real life, whether one will ask a given person for directions, take the time to give directions, smile, or quickly roll up the car window when this person walks too close. These are the some of the ways we determine if we trust someone, if we would consider hiring them as a babysitter, or take their advice, or sit down and talk with them, or kiss them and risk falling in love.

What is trust, exactly? Is it a feeling? We seem to think so. We see (or hear or smell) someone and we feel something that we interpret as trust. Then we smile, extend a hand, or we ignore them or even turn our backs. The fingers part of this exercise was contrived, but the accompanying actions were familiar. As others and I reflected on the exercise, we remembered not only our own feelings of trust, but what it felt like to have a stranger deliberately turn her back on you, or shake your hand or even give you a hug.

The facilitator, after asking dozens of open-ended questions, then dropped a bomb. He said, "Trust is not a feeling. It is an action. What you were experiencing was not trust, but your *preconditions* for trust. Trust is a decision. It is specific. One doesn't just "trust" another, one trusts another *with* something."

My face flushed. Although it took me a while to process what he had said, I sensed instantly that he was right, that I and most of the others have been thinking about trust in the wrong way. Trusting is not feeling something for somebody. Trusting is giving them the keys to your car, or telling them a secret, or walking alone with them at night, or embarking on an important project or adventure with them. *Feeling* trust and actually *trusting* are related but distinct.

We trust one another, or ourselves, *with* something. A gift is *entrusted* to you. In church, we entrust leaders with responsibilities, with roles, with power. We trust our teachers and childcare providers with our children. When you share something personal and private with me, you trust me to keep it in confidence.

Now: back to those preconditions of trust. Do they have a place? On what basis is it wise to trust another or oneself with something?

Some people trust gut feelings. They just know. Most of us experience this at least part of the time. Unfortunately, gut reactions aren't always right. Forty or certainly fifty years ago, a large majority of Americans had a strong, intuitive gut feeling that interracial marriage was wrong. Racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and all prejudices involve strong gut feelings that are extremely difficult for logic and objective information to overcome.

Gut reactions need a filter of discernment. We have the power to choose to trust in a different direction than our initial feelings would lead us. We can feel a one finger response to someone and still decide to trust that person with something important to us. We may do so out of need, and have our preconceived notions called into question. Conversely, we can feel a four-finger or even ten-finger response and decide not to trust that person even with our phone number, letting our commitments, the advice of others, or our reason take precedence over our feelings.

What most of us seek before a major decision, a significant act of trust, is information. People considering a long-term partnership, for instance, may gather as much data as they can about their partner, themselves, and their compatibility.

Such information helps, but ask anyone who's been married or in a committed relationship for several decades if what they knew at the beginning prepared them adequately for the twists and turns of the years to follow. Think about any major endeavor in your life: taking a position of authority, raising a child, relocating. Do we ever *really* know what's ahead? Have you ever said to yourself, "If I knew what I was getting into, I never would have done it - but I'm glad I did"?

One of my favorite writers, the poet, farmer, and essayist Wendell Berry, has mused on this subject quite thoughtfully in his book, *Standing By Words*. He writes,

“Knowledge, like everything else, has its place, and... we need urgently now to *put* it in its place... Let us...abandon our superstitious beliefs about knowledge: that it is ever sufficient, that it can of itself solve problems... Let us give up our forlorn pursuit of the ‘informed decision.’”

Wendell Berry is not suggesting we stop thinking or disregard information. However, he reminds us that when we make significant commitments, which require the highest levels of trust, we must do so with inadequate information. Regarding marriage, he writes, “We know that people stay married for different reasons than those for which they get married and that the later reasons will have to be discovered.”

So how are we then to make commitments, to trust, if not relying solely on gut feelings or on analysis of information?

My best answer to this question was provided by one of you, in a conversation just inside the entrance to this building, during my candidating week in April. A church member said to me, after introducing himself, “I really liked your service today, and I’m so glad you’re here. But I want you to know that I decided to vote for you before I met you, based on the Search Committee’s recommendation.”

This brief encounter stayed with me a long time, as I discerned why I felt it so reassuring. It’s wonderful to be liked by others, and to feel a shared sense of chemistry and compatibility. But this man’s decision to support me arose not from personal affinity or like-mindedness or anything like that. He decided to support me because he decided to trust the process. Now, I hasten to note that his trust in the search process could very well have been influenced by his gut feelings and his information about the Search Committee. And who could hold that against him, for what a thoroughly charming and reliable group they were.

Still, his words and manner indicated to me that his decision to trust me as his congregation’s minister, as his minister, had less to do with feelings or even specific information about me, than it did with his decision to trust the process. I may be reading too much into this, but I think he communicated that he knew that the act of trusting is itself creative, and his decision to support my ministry - an act of trust - was based not on adequate information or personal feelings but on his commitment to help create the kind of future he wants for his congregation. This creation requires trust; it requires faith - a willingness to risk and commit in the face of inadequate information. When his feelings happened to align with this commitment, that was merely the icing on the cake.

His approach reminds me of some of the people in that workshop I took in the early 90s. A few people went around holding up four fingers to everyone, and therefore giving hugs to all those who also held up four fingers. I observed this out of the corner of my eye while I was holding up my zero-to-four fingers, and I decided that these people weren’t doing the exercise right; maybe it could even be

considered cheating. Surely they were not being honest about their trust level for each of these people.

Now I see things differently. I'm not saying everybody should hug everyone else all of the time. A West Coast church wouldn't select a minister from New England for that particular lesson! Hugging should be a choice for both parties. But on what basis is it made? On what basis do we welcome, affirm, trust others? In April, a church member in effect held up four fingers to me and told me this was based not on feelings about me but about his decision to support and trust the process.

This is the kind of trust that will enable us to have a successful ministry together. It's lovely to be in the honeymoon phase and have all of these good feelings flowing around, but the long-term health of a community depends more on this kind of trust, this kind of faith. Feelings change; they rise and fall. I know this as certainly as I know the sun will set tonight.

This kind of trust is a decision to trust another with something specific, based only partially on information: sensory, analytic, and intuitive. This kind of trust arises more from a decision to help create a future worth living. This is what couples experience when they marry, when they say, "I do": they are wedding themselves not only to one another but to an uncertain future in which their shared commitment will be their guide. This is scary, risky, religious stuff. And it is closely connected with happiness.

Our decision to trust should not ignore our feelings or other information. Our personal safety depends on our willingness to pay attention to our feelings and information about others. Please don't hear me as recommending that our trustful or mistrustful feelings be ignored. They are part of the information available to us and they have their place. As Berry says, let us keep a place for our information but know also that trusting is ultimately a decision, among the most creative we can make. .

Wendell Berry writes, "If we cannot work on the basis of sufficient information, then we have to work on the basis of an understanding of harmony."

Harmony. Music. What is the song, and how does our part fit in? How does this other person's part blend in? What is the nature of the situation?

Most of the time we go walking around, making unconscious, private judgements about whether or not a person can be trusted, not stopping to realize how irrelevant is this question. Would I trust this person to be my babysitter? Perhaps not - but were you thinking of asking anyway? But here's a question, relevant to encounters with strangers on the street - will you trust this person with your smile?

No matter how little I know a person, or how untrustworthy they might seem to me, I believe there is some act of genuine trust that can take place, an act that is relatively safe and yet enough of an emotional risk to be spiritually refreshing for both parties.

To trust is to risk. Gendler writes,

*Trust is at home in the desert and the city,
with dolphins and tigers,
with outlaws, lovers, and saints...
She has a gambler's respect for the interplay
between luck and skill:
she is the mother of love.*

I remember a seminary class with Til Evans, who taught religious education at Starr King School for the Ministry. In this class, somebody asked Til what she believed, theologically. She sat back and paused. Then she answered, "I believe we are held in the arms of a great Trust." She said nothing of God, love, or truth. We are entrusted with life. What will we do with it?

Trust is not a feeling. Trust is an action; it is specific. Trust is a gift. When we offer one another the gift of trust, we create an opening for something greater. Trust frees us from our fears and helps us give birth to Love.

In this religious community, where we strive to be guided by Truth and to live in and through and towards love, may we know the vital role of trusting. May we trust one another, carefully, deliberately, joyfully. May we hear the music and invite one another to play our parts.

Amen.

CLOSING HYMN: Just as Long as I Have Breath, #6

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Evans, Til. My notes from her reflections in the class "And the Generations Come and Go," Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, California, Spring 1996.