

Engagement: Whole Self-Whole Faith

A sermon offered at

Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, Illinois

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Sunday, October 2, 2011

How many of you are familiar with Star Trek, the Next Generation when the Enterprise was ready to head deeper into space and Captain Jean Luc Picard look forward into the view screen and give the command, engage? At those times, I always had the sense of all the engines, the crew, the Enterprise being in concert, in harmony, hitting their stride, pressing forward toward their next adventure. It was my first really strong, positive association with the idea of engagement. Until then engagement was just a long limbo time when women wore diamond rings and made plans for more serious commitment to come. I much preferred the starship's acceleration.

When the Board and I met in the spring for a retreat they were seeking a unifying theme for the upcoming year – something that could provide the congregation with new ideas and new challenges, something that would support the thriving and strengthening of the congregation – a way in which we could learn together. And the idea of engagement arose and was enthusiastically pursued. Certainly each member of the Board is deeply engaged. They are up to their necks in congregational life – and love and want to support it. It was immediately clear to all of us that engagement was a rich concept for congregational thriving. It was perfect as a learning focus for the year.

It can be too easy to see engagement in Trecky terms – the dangerous clues are everywhere around us – we even have an expression – the rules of engagement – that has to do with how one enters conflict. And on Star Trek “engage” was the command that caused the starship to accelerate to nearly light speed. However, in a spiritual, in a religious context – the idea of engagement is tremendously different than that. It has to do with a sense of spirit – of deep knowing, ethics, purpose, meaning, that suffuses and permeates every aspect of life – of the life of an individual or the life of a community. Engagement is the very opposite of alienation – it is the antidote to estrangement, to directionlessness, purposelessness.

Back in theological school we read a book some of you may be familiar with – it's dated now – called Habits of the Heart and in that book the writers, among whom was Robert Bellah, from whom we quoted earlier, created a study of people across a wide spectrum of American life and they discovered that American society was slowly drying from the inside out because of the high value attached to individualism: the culture of separate families, isolated houses, and spiritual self-definition. As sociologists and scholars of American Religion and Culture – what they found was a society of people alone and ungrounded. Even the New Age – which seemed to promise a new way of exploring faith and finding new convergences was largely contributing to a society in which people may occupy a common space – a meeting hall, a sanctuary, a retreat center, but are still on their private paths, groping for individual meaning. On one level, that's a sensible response to too many centuries of being told what to believe and how to live – we each need self-determination.

They wrote about this interview: “Sheila Larson is a young nurse who ... describes her faith as “Sheilaism.” This suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, one for each of us. “I believe in God,” Sheila says. “I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.”

The balance, it turned out, in Bellah's research and the research of many who've come after him – the balance falls too often in the direction of the lonely soul.

You know the Beatles song:

All thru' the day I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.
 All thru' the night I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.
 Now they're frightened of leaving it
 Ev'ryone's weaving it,
 Coming on strong all the time,
 All thru' the day I me mine.

And yet, the path of the lone seeker and the life of isolation is not the path to real enlightenment. Each one of you knows this on some deep level – you are here -- perhaps you are here for the first time checking out a new religious community – perhaps you're here weekly because you know that we are better together than we are alone – we need one another, we are wiser, more challenged, more inclined to grow, happier, when we are together. There are acres of medical research that indicate that people with active involvement in religious communities are happier and experience better outcomes in health challenges. We are even healthier we are spiritually engaged with one another. We don't necessarily need researchers to tell us what we know in our hearts – but since *Habits of the Heart*, many studies have demonstrated this emptiness in American life. Back around 2000 Robert Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone* in which he talked about the breakdown of American social institutions. Early in our history we had a penchant for these voluntary associations – they were vibrant and made our society generous and friendly. Gradually these organizations are dwindling away – and the generations who made them so vibrant are disappearing. It's made me wonder if the lure of the tea party is that it meets unmet needs for belonging.

Both Bellah and Putnam pointed to churches as our sort of last best hope. Not because every church is good and healthy, not because all churches have the best answers or even positive theologies – but because they still draw us together week after week and invite us to step out of the cocoon of private life, teach us how to play well together, and draw us into a community of trust and common practice.

In other words – engage us with one another.

It's the hunger for that sense of engagement that leads even the shyest among us to brave Atherton Hall after services and hope for some meaningful connection. It leads us onto committees and projects, into the choir, and causes us to teach religious education. We want to feel ourselves as part of a larger community – known, seen, valued. Being engaged actually provides that dimension to life. It can be challenging in a society in which we've been taught to find our value in getting our own way or in our personal wealth or professional accomplishment. But, read my lips – none of that matters here. Not on the most important level. What matters is the experience you bring, the caring, the time you take to pay attention to a child or to a person who is shut in at home, what matters is the coffee you made, the cups you cleared away, the casserole you delivered, the card you wrote, the game you brought to game night, the music you played on Sunday or the encouragement you gave someone to play, the time you took to explain what the initials of a church group means to a new comer rather than speaking shorthand. What matters is the smile you shared with someone over coffee or the warmth you extended when you were feeling shy. What matters is that, when you could have been angry at that meeting, you took the time to be careful with your words, what matters is that when you could have turned your back on the new person and talked with a friend you awkwardly reached out to someone new, when you could have pushed for your line item in the budget you listened and then realized that someone else had an even more valuable perspective.

What matters that you are here, and you have become engaged here. And that you have made room for others to be engaged as well. In fact, it is to make it easier for people to find their niche, find a home, and find meaningful engagement that we are hiring the membership coordinator this year.

To be engaged is to be part of something – or as Paul of Tarsus whom I often dislike but who said a few things that made timeless sense wrote, "... to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body... For we were all baptized by ^[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free... Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body... The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary... the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment... God has put the body together... so that there should be no division ... but that its parts should have equal concern for each other." The writer has a significant insight here – that we are all different and yet make up one stronger whole together. To be engaged is to be far more than we could be on our own.

Engagement occurs when the principles you aspire to take hold in your life – when you are grounded in deep values – engaged in your principles and articles of deepest faith, when they are more than an hour you spend on Sunday morning or some other time. I know that one of the reasons that people enjoy our District and General Assemblies so much – the annual meetings where we do the business of our association and share the collective wisdom of our congregations, staff, lay leaders, and

ministers – is that for a few days they can immerse themselves in this faith community – in worship services, in service projects, learning together, in talking deep into the night about matters of deep importance. Life does seem upside down when the smallest amount of a person's time is spent focused on the well-being of their souls and on sustaining the community that nourishes their souls. It seems sad to me that we bring our children here for just an hour of religious education each week when what we most hope for is that they grow up to be ethical and grounded people whose lives are rich with meaning and spirit, genuine belonging, and a sense of purpose. An hour each week... seems like a small portion of time for the care of the soul.

So it is that people choose to invest more of themselves in our common faith. I was here yesterday morning for a meeting with Colleen Vahey, Jeff Hamrick, and a strong group of members to talk about intergenerational worship. They were all so engaged, full of ideas, energy – and yearning for the best for our children and young people and they wanted to deepen the worship experience for every person here. It was a thrilling meeting and the most exciting part was that each person there was fully engaged. And as we talked, it wasn't just ideas that we exchanged – but energy – spirit – it was as though we were already worshiping together. People come to meetings not simply because they want to be sure that this congregation thrives and is strong long into the future – but because they long to be, in some significant way, nourished spiritually, by engagement with one another.

At heart ... this is because we are – though Paul would phrase it differently – part of one another. We have our seventh principle of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. We mean it and we know it – as I have said before – this is more than a scientific fact – it's more than fact that something that happens on one side of the world has an impact on the other, more than fact that the earth itself is made of the bodies of every living thing that came before us – every leaf and tree, cell, animal and crystal, it is beyond the science that demonstrates that all our subatomic particles dance in and among all that is creating a dance of attraction and transformation rather than form and solidity, it is more than a historical fact that all of our fates are interwoven – it is fact and more than fact – it is a spiritual, emotional, experienced reality. It is our deepest reality. The meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh earlier spoke simply of this: "We cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is."

We each are – because everything else is. It's when we come together in religious community that we begin to get a stronger sense of that – even when we can't put it into words. My wholeness is made of everything else – and everything else contains me as well. So when we gather here – the gathering itself is a recognition that we are because we are engaged in everything else. And then, with everything that we do together, we piece back together the selves that have been broken and isolated by the sad individualism of our society. In every way that we celebrate, meet, feast, teach, overcome differences and honor them we reclaim our authentic wholeness. Earlier when we used our bodies to offer the gift of energy from the earth and sky, from our hearts and to one another – we recognized also that we not minds on lifeless sticks – we are whole persons – persons of mind, body, spirit, feeling individual and community -- whole persons.

And the more we bend our congregational life to celebrating our wholeness as persons – engaging our wholeness the more alive we will be individually and together. I once knew a woman named Ruth Ann, she was retired speech teacher. It seemed to me that the more involved she was at church the more sparkle she had in her eye. Her husband, Don was a retired education professor. It seemed that every time we met he was brimming with eagerness and creativity. The two lived in a very, very small old house and travelled very little. When the sanctuary was painted there was Ruth Ann up on a ladder with a brush, at the Passover Seder her best friend from college came from Iowa to visit and join in, when the Capital Campaign came around, somehow they came up with 100,000 dollars to put into it. When conflicts broke out in the church you could always count on them to have compassionate insights to every aspect of the conflict and the greatest hope for a positive outcome. If you opened a congregational photo album from the last 35 years you would find pictures of the two of them busy and smiling. They were energized by their congregational engagement and the congregation was a fundamentally sweeter place because of them.

What Don and Ruth Ann taught me was that a building, a community, becomes a home if you make your home there – and they also taught me up close and personal something that I knew theoretically – that congregational life is self-renewing – it sustains and nourishes and, ultimately, -- well – it goes something like this:

Hokey Pokey.

In our long cherished individualism we have been robbed of the richness and joy of our connection with one another. We've been deprived of the pleasure of being playful together, of blessing one another and being blessed whole-heartedly. And when we turn ourselves around – we see more of the world and like dervishes – we find ourselves closer to the divine – in ourselves and one another. But it isn't just ourselves that needs to turn around – or needs blessing.

This world of which we are a part needs our blessing – our healing – needs our participation and care so that it can thrive. This, too, a scientific reality – but even more – by healing our world – by being of service to the world and in the world we complete the picture of engagement.

I encountered the deepest notion of engagement when I began to explore and study the Buddhism taught by the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk. I remember growing up hearing the expression navel gazing – to refer to people who were meditators – yogis, monks and such. The implication was that all they did was look at their belly buttons and ignore the world. For many centuries Buddhist nuns and monks certainly led contemplative lives and focused on alleviating suffering by teaching themselves and others to detach from the world. For Thich Nhat Hanh the core message of Buddhism – is captured in the Metta Sutta – one of the teachings of the Buddha part of which reads:

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, a young monk in the 1960's in a Vietnam, a nation undergoing torments from within and without, sustaining a recollection was simply not enough. His people were suffering, dying, caught between various forces none of which cared for the lives and well-being of the people and he realized that if awareness and awakenedness, were at the core of Buddhist religious teaching, then it wasn't enough to be aware – that awareness had to call forth a response of compassion. And so he created the movement that has come to be called Engaged Buddhism.

He wrote: "what happens in the here and the now is global warming, climate change, the destruction of ecosystem, the lack of communication, war, conflict, suicide, with mindfulness we have to be aware of what is going on in our body, feeling, emotion, environment. Engaged Buddhism responds to what is happening in the here and the now."

So rather than detach – he inspired engagement – he started schools, supported clinics, cared for refugees, lead protests, travelled around the world to ask for support for peace, refused to take sides with either the north or the south – but insisted on caring for all people – soldiers and civilians. Now, some 55 years after writing those words he continues this work and has inspired a movement of engaged spirituality.

Robert Bellah and his team discovered that, as each person worked for their own superficial and individual well-being rather than well-being a deep emptiness was created. The wealth we liked to boast of among the nations of the world was, instead a deep poverty. He put it this way:

"We have imagined ourselves a special creation, set apart from other humans... we see that our poverty is as absolute as that of the poorest nations. We have attempted to deny the human condition in our quest for power after power. It would be well for us to rejoin the human race, to accept our essential poverty as a gift, and to share our material wealth with those in need."

People like Thich Nhat Hanh, Brother Thomas Merton, the Reverend Doctor MLK, Karen Armstrong, the Dalai Lama, oh the list is too long – there can be no spirituality -- no religious life that is not engaged – where the whole self is involved – spiritual practice and centering, community worship,

breaking bread together, serving the world, welcoming the stranger, protecting the vulnerable, addressing the circumstances of injustice, liberating the oppressed. Finally, engagement takes us out of the sanctuary and into the world – each according to our gifts and talents – to be of service to that greater whole of which we are a part.

It turns us all around so that we can turn the world around. Clearly this congregational year – we won't merely be thinking about engagement – that would be disengaged. Instead this year, together, in this sanctuary, in Atherton Hall, in every room and out into the streets we will practice engagement allowing ourselves to be nourished by the reality that we are all one, in fact. By the reality that burn out has to do with action without reflection, business without meaning, individual success without recognition of the countless unseen people who make wealth possible, work without dignity, politics without intelligent discourse – in this place grounded in our principles, moving in our deepest values, seeking our noblest purposes we will be engaged – and – in this way we will be nourished.

I used to sort of chuckle at the idea that Space would be the final frontier – I am sure, rather, that the final real frontier is the frontier of the soul – the soul in every living thing and the soul that is the concert of all living things. This will not happen at lightspeed – but at the speed of the heart – at the speed of hope – and the speed of love. It will not happen because of machinery or technique – but because – finally we will all long for one another – for our own wholeness and for the flourishing and future of our faith and our world. It will happen because we Engage.