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Let us lead with appreciation.

What I Meant to Say

A regular at church observes that the same young girl sings a solo every Christmas Eve. Why, he wonders, don't other kids, like mine, get to sing? At coffee hour, he asks the girl's parent whose reply cuts him to the quick: "Membership," says the parent, "has its privileges." Smarting, he goes to the minister, whose eyes grow sad. She can't change what happened. "I'm so sorry," she says.

A relative newcomer screws up her courage and stays for coffee hour. She spots an open chair and a group of people chatting, and the minute she sits down, the woman next to her exclaims: "Your perfume! I can't tolerate it!" Mortified, the newcomer goes to move, but her accuser has dramatically pushed her chair back, grabbed her things and stalked off. Adding insult to injury in the group circle later, the accuser announces to everyone that, although some people "like to spritz themselves," wearing scent is self-centered and harmful to others.

We say the darnedest things to each other in beloved community. We don't mean to cause pain. Often we're acting out our own. We don't want to chase people away, but our words can land hard. How can we do better? We think of ourselves as welcoming and extending the hand of invitation. And where to go from there? How can we move into deeper relationship? What turns our good intentions into *beloved* community?

It can take a long time to feel like you belong. When I discovered my town's UU church some twenty years ago, though I loved worship and wouldn't miss a Sunday service, I would scoot out afterward. Anything to avoid coffee hour! It felt like a big cocktail party where everyone was pals with each other or had important business to do. Intending to be welcoming, they gave red mugs to newbies so that people would notice they were new and talk to them. Those red mugs were well intentioned, but all you want is to blend in, not identify as "the other."

For me, belonging came, at long last, the day of the big auction. They'd asked for volunteers, but what could I offer? By the time I finally dared to show up, I found one frantic volunteer, working against the clock. Decorating, left to finish the job alone, and not having much fun, he was relieved for the help.

He tossed me a one of many rolls of hot pink crepe paper, and for a couple of hours we put it everywhere, a silly proposition made sillier as time ran out. We became fast friends that day. And here's the thing. What clicked for us was not each others' resumes or achievements or opinions but laughter – getting punchy with that pink crepe paper.

What gets in the way of simply enjoying each other? An idea I hear now and then is quite UU-specific and hard to accept. UU Rev. Fredric Muir has written for years that our denomination has always suffered from three things: individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism.

Though we think of these as positive qualities, he says UUism would grow faster if we could move in a different direction.

First, individualism: Our emphasis on the worth and dignity of every individual often comes at the expense of Beloved Community. When we shout a loud NO or are certain in our opinion or our beliefs, or our lack thereof, we can easily forget that we are a community. We can lose sight of that.

Exceptionalism. That is the way we unthinkingly make assumptions about edgy things like class and education level and intelligence. Our assumptions exclude people. Fred Muir writes,

“We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend, or share, lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating or even humiliating to others.” What [he asks] is the antidote to this sin?...We must cultivate a firm belief that our way is one way, a good way for those who choose it, but it is not the only way of faith.”¹

Lastly, anti-authoritarianism. We religious liberals have a reputation for thinking we’re right. We don’t like being told otherwise and chafe at authority.

This is hard-hitting stuff. It may resonate with you. Maybe it hits your buttons – food for thought. Yet don’t we also climb the stairs to this sanctuary with a humbleness? Don’t we come here to do better, to nurture the good in us, to lift ourselves from the everyday and be reminded of our best intentions?

Unitarian Universalism – which some call a movement – is about choosing our way every day. Unlike some religions that focus on the final judgment or reincarnation next time around as a higher-level being, this creedless faith is about living our earthly life on purpose. And *speaking* on purpose.

My sister, a social worker, interacts everyday with people on the margins of society who struggle to be understood. Her clients live hard lives with huge challenges. Many suffer with mental illness. She has to talk on purpose all day long and has a gift for that. She defuses situations with a mix of appreciation – showing someone she sees them – and redirection. She’ll cheerfully beckon to a wildly bellowing, singing person, saying, “Hey, Maestro, come walk with me.” She helps re-frame loud or violent words. “What you meant to say,” she’ll suggest in a reasonable voice, no rush, was...” and then she’ll put into her words the pain she sees.

Living on purpose can include loving on purpose. Infusing what we say with appreciation. Moving beyond pleasantries or intellectual sharings by looking for *more* in someone and noticing how a person’s presence impacts us. What is it that makes us lean in?

¹ Fredric Muir, “The end of IChurch: To build Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism Needs a New Narrative,” *UU World*, Winter 2012 at <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/end-ichurch>

The practice of *appreciative inquiry* can help us do this. You see it in various cultures – corporate, educational institutions, faith communities. Appreciative inquiry is the search for the best in people.

I learned about it in divinity school in a January seminar. Time short, the professor began asking the class right away for appreciations of each other. How could we do that? We hardly knew each other! But within a few days, we'd become experts. I always think back on those two weeks as a love fest. We could hardly wait for the appreciations part of the day, all hands going up with everyone wanting to share how we delighted in one another. It fed on itself....

The rule was non-attributive appreciations only. Non-attributive appreciation focuses on how someone's way of being positively impacts *you*. While a person might be able to disqualify a compliment – “I'm not smart,” “I look terrible” – they cannot disqualify the impact they have on you. Non-attributive appreciations are potent because we all want to make a difference in the world and we all really want to know how we fit into each others' lives. It feels good to hear that kind of feedback.

Appreciative inquiry takes discipline and curiosity – and a bit of calculus, too. As with the Buddhist practice of loving kindness, start with someone you like, someone whose presence feels good to you. As you get better at it, you can try it with people you know less well and even people who hit your buttons.

Before voicing your appreciation, remember to avoid mentioning qualities that they could refute. Don't say, “You were so brave to do that.” People rarely think of themselves as brave. Instead try, “I keep thinking about you and what you did – I like to think someday I could do that too. You inspire me. Thank you.”

To the person who built your deck, don't tell them how perfect it is – they know exactly where the errors are. Instead try, “Every time I sit on the deck I appreciate the way you go about your work. When you are on the job, I always feel that we're in good hands. Thank you.”

People think of themselves as big-hearted. Do you? We may doubt our value or even our abilities, but consider ourselves to be generous people. How often do we put that generosity into words? I propose that we try to do that here. Generous words go a long, long way toward making the world a better place.

So a challenge for you. Look around the room. If you know most of the people here, choose anyone and think for a moment about something you've experienced knowing them – maybe the way they get things done or how they're always arriving with baked goods, or maybe it's their way with words or the look on their face. Ask yourself: How do I feel when I think that?

During coffee hour – that time when it's so easy to blow it – please try this. Tell them how they positively affect you. Then be sure to say thank you.

If you're here for the first or second or third time, pretty much all you can go by is a person's face. Or maybe their voice or their welcome. "I noticed your smile. It feels warm. Thank you." "I appreciated sitting in front of you – you got me through the hymn. Thank you."

One more thing. This is easier said than done. Some people do it naturally. They're rays of sunshine in this world. Others don't. We can be so busy reacting to what's going on, or thinking about what we're going to say next, or wondering what people think of us, that putting our appreciation into words doesn't occur to us.

Many of us tend to *lead* with other parts of our personality. In John's and my our holiday cards, we used to describe our kids' styles – whether playing the piano or skiing, our daughter was always cautious and measured while our son always led with action and emotion.

Imagine leading with appreciation all the time. I wish I had three years ago, when we began this journey together. I wish I'd had the self-awareness to offer streams of praise and appreciation for the people who at the time were leading a fast-moving project. Instead – having been brought up in a high-energy household that always felt a bit *too* fast – I brought a well-honed tendency to step back with furrowed brow and ask questions. "Let me catch up with you," I remember saying. I like to think that I learned from that experience to lead, when possible, with appreciation.

That's why I love that Billie Collins poem that Margaret read. He leads with appreciation, falling in love with everything he sees. No loud NO's there! No individualism, no exceptionalism, no anti-authoritarianism . Just pure appreciation – pure YES – and a willingness to put it into words.

Let us look for the best in our neighbors. Let us tell them what they most want to hear. That they matter. That you hold them in warm regard. That they're not alone. That they belong. It is wonderful to hear that kind of feedback.

On the path to Beloved Community, let us lead with appreciation.

So may it be.