

Right Here

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
Re-gathering Sunday
September 7, 2025

Rev. Craig M. Nowak

Just a short distance from here, indeed practically across the street, is an ecumenical retreat center affiliated with the Sisters of Mercy, a Roman Catholic order, called Mercy By The Sea. Over the years I have attended many workshops, group and individual retreats there, but I first learned about the place from my late mentor when this whole idea of entering the ministry was more a curiously persistent itch than serious commitment. He had suggested I find some space to give that itch a little more attention, in other words, to listen more deeply to what was stirring inside. So I looked into it. I learned that the center had a labyrinth overlooking Long Island Sound and, more importantly, that walking a labyrinth was a good, time tested, meditative exercise. Perhaps just the thing I needed.

As I recall, I took half a day off from work and chose a lovely afternoon in late summer or early autumn to drive down from my office and visit for the first time. I had high expectations...of the place...of myself...and what I would come away with. The first of these expectations was dashed shortly after my arrival when, following an encounter with the dour, unfriendly woman staffing the front desk, I seriously considered just getting back in my car and going home. Mustering all the generosity of spirit I could, I imagined perhaps she was suffering in some way I couldn't see... "Maybe a loved one is ill", I thought. Or maybe she's drowning in debt. Perhaps someone arriving just before me was insensitive or rude to her. Whatever it may have been, remembering everyone is wounded by life in some way or another kept me walking towards the labyrinth instead of back to the parking lot that day.

Ah, the labyrinth.

In my mind this labyrinth was expansive and beautifully maintained with a pattern discernible from afar. In reality it was compact, with untidy edges overgrown with late summer grasses and weeds. From a distance it appeared more the ruins of something long gone and forgotten than any labyrinth I'd seen in pictures. With my optimism and expectations now considerably reduced, I nonetheless entered the labyrinth and began to walk it. I soon reached the conclusion it was not working. Not only was I grumbling internally about the state of the labyrinth, but the initial irritation I felt about the woman at the front desk returned and soon my head was buzzing with two grumbling narratives

running concurrently in my head. This is not at all what I was expecting. “What a waste of time”, I thought.

Disappointed and feeling kind of lost, I left the labyrinth and decided to go sit on a fallen tree that was lying diagonally across the beach and stretched just into the water. By this time the sky had become overcast and it seemed it might rain. Still, I sat there, fixing my gaze on the water flowing in and out of a little dip in the sand as the waves washed ashore.

After some time the grumbling narrative in my mind receded and for a while there was nothing. Then a single word or idea, really, came to mind, “hospitality.” I immediately looked up toward the horizon which appeared merged with the sky and I with it. Just then, the sun appeared, as if it had pushed aside the clouds, and shone briefly yet brightly before stepping back behind a veil of gray. I didn’t know what all of this meant, if anything, but I somehow knew THIS was what I had come for. Hospitality has been the foundation of my call and understanding of ministry, as an individual and community, since that day.

Now many, perhaps most of us, are inclined to think of hospitality as an act, something we do and in a certain way. Indeed, we speak of “offering hospitality” and even of various forms like, “southern hospitality.” But as I understand it, it is more than something we do or how we do it.

About two thousand years ago a guy came along, perhaps you’ve heard of him, his name was Jesus. Jesus went around talking about something he called, “the kingdom of God” and if the patriarchal language gets under your skin, go with something else, maybe the beloved community.

As with hospitality people carry many assumptions about the kingdom of God or beloved community. In fact, people have been fighting about it ever since Jesus was executed for talking about it. Undoubtedly many likely think of a place, and often a distant, as in after death, kind of place. In other words, a place that doesn’t seem real or possible in the present.

Yet Jesus told his followers, “The kingdom of God is among you” which is sometimes translated as “within you.” In other words, it’s right here. What’s more there’s a universal key with which anyone can gain entry at any time.

That key is hospitality.

As the spiritual teacher and writer Thomas Moore notes, “When you find yourself in the kingdom, you will be in a different world, though at the factual level everything will be the same...”

...The kingdom is translucent and empty. You don't see it in itself, but you see the world altered by it. Where one person sees competition and acts aggressively, you see community and act with compassion."

Hospitality then, is not a specific act so much as an unimaginably generous state of heart and mind born of a profound shift in vision.

And in the end every faith tradition, including Unitarian Universalism, is concerned with facilitating a profound shift in vision and to bringing into focus and reality, a new way of life and of living. A life marked by a radically hospitable relationship to self, others, and planet.

The world's religions have long employed various methods or practices to facilitate that shift in vision among their adherents: stories, myth, parables, poetry, song, chant, ritual, and of course meditation, contemplation, and prayer. Speaking of prayer, but which to my mind applies equally to other spiritual practices as well, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, prayer is about "giving voice to the human predicament. It (prayer) does not change things; it (prayer) changes people, and people change things."

It is little wonder then that in "The Arrivals", our vision-oriented reading this morning, Rudy Nemser, repeats the phrase, "We pray" throughout the text offering both host and guest a reminder of what we're working toward together...beloved community where...

You know and feel bone-deep that you are welcome...wanted.
You find shelter from fear and pain amidst life's harsh realities.
You are met with authenticity, appreciation of one's whole self,
and are accepted as and where you are.
You are offered rest, joy, courage, and hope.
You experience and know love.
And practicing what it means to be human you learn to extend
the same others.

If you ask me, that's a pretty good reason for being here, for gathering each Sunday, and each new church year. And that's what our prayer, silent meditation, rituals, music, sermons, outreach, religious exploration, teachings, values and sources seek to inspire and effect...a shift in vision...to make manifest, to make real... the beloved community right here... in this life.

That's why we gather.

Not for self improvement or self help and certainly not to feel morally superior to our neighbors. We gather for transformation, for a profound shift in vision and

practice in how we know and relate to ourselves, to others, and the world in which we live.

Our gathering is not a test, it is not a drill for an idealized life in a distant future or so-called “real life” after death. We gather to risk living into being the better world already in our midst, not unlike the pheasant and the crow did in our story for all ages...

“Crow”, says the Pheasant, “You’re a better bird than me.”

“No, Pheasant,” replies the Crow, “You are a better bird than me.”

But oh how hard such generous words can be for us to say aloud, let alone to think privately. We know it’s not easy. We can think a million reasons why someone is not better than us, 999,999 of them being reasons we’ve learned only since birth... in school, at home, on the playground, or from tv, social media, politicians, and sadly even some preachers. And we know how hard it is to accept ourselves, let alone another. Conditions and walls, literal and psychological keep us safe, so we think. It is far easier to label someone other than welcome them as brother...sister...sibling.

But then again, no one said it was going to be easy.

Remember in our story for all ages...Crow and Pheasant’s friendship so surprised the other birds some decided to test it,

“Pheasant, why do you spend so much time with that good-for-nothing Crow?”

“You mustn’t say that!”, replied Pheasant. “Crow is a better bird than I and he honors me by living with me.”

And when Crow was similarly tested, he replies,

“You mustn’t say that! Pheasant is a better bird than I and he honors me by living with me.”

In time, so the story goes, the birds, impressed by Crow and Pheasant’s attitude toward one another began to wonder,

“Why do we always fight and quarrel?”

They watched how Crow and Pheasant treated one another and began to be more generous of heart and mind too. Whereupon they found themselves living in beloved community where life was far more enjoyable.

Beloved community.

Sometimes hard to find, but always right here.

Waiting to be lived into.

This is why we gather
together.

May it be so.
Amen and Blessed Be