

SERMON "Community and Structure"

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Our Service today is somewhat truncated, to allow extra time for the AGM of the congregation. We will sing two and a half hymns instead of four, only have one Reading instead of two, and have two and a half points in the sermon instead of the usual three or four.

Since I was introduced to haiku (a Japanese poetic form based on 17 syllables and 2 contrasting themes) during my training for ministry 45 years ago, I've had a personal interest in haiku, although not active for some years. I'm going to share two with you this morning, one each to introduce the first 1.5 points and a Sufi parable to introduce the second.

First a haiku by Issa, a Japanese haiku master of the 17th century:

"Everything I touch with tenderness,
alas,
pricks like a bramble."

Our sense of touch is primarily mediated through our skin. We have terms, thin-skinned and thick-skinned to refer to those who are very sensitive and those who are not. Each of us will be at some times and some circumstances thin-skinned – sensitive – and at other times thick-skinned – able to endure pain; some of us may find one or other of such states an enduring personality trait. Getting the balance right between sensitivity to others and autonomy of action is one of life's abiding struggles.

To explore this metaphore of skin one needs to look at the actuality of skin. We usually think of our skin as our boundary with the world, what is inside is ME and what is outside is THEM. Skin separates us from rest of world but skin is also our first line of interaction with the biological and physical complexity of the 'outside' world. We've all heard about poisons which can kill us if we breathe concentrations of just one or two particles per million and military scientists have developed poisons in liquid form where one drop on our skin is enough to kill us, so our skin is not a totally effective barrier between 'us' and the rest of the world. There are animals that produce toxins almost that strong, too, as a protection against predators.

Before I entered training for the ministry in the mid-1960s I trained to teach maths and science. It was an exciting time to be interested in science, with an explosion of new instruments and new discoveries. I've kept that interest in science and one of the programmes I enjoy on the BBC is its science series on Invisible Worlds (the very small and the very large). The BBC, one of the great treasures of this country I have moved to and settled in! Scientists working on the human genome are now saying that the tiny bacteria in our stomachs that enable us to digest food also have to be DNA sequenced to get a better pic-

ture of who we are. These bugs are part of us and are also measurably location specific. People raised in China will have a different collection of digestive bacteria compared to people raised here. This is also true of the bacteria that live on our skin, that are integral to its health as we interact with the environment -- the tiny bugs that live between our little finger and our ring finger are slightly different to the bugs that live between our index and middle fingers. We are used to thinking of ourselves like atoms, like billiard balls that bounce off each other in encounters, but we now know that atoms interact with each other and that our skin is an interactive living surface, not an impenetrable barrier separating us from the world.

Our second 'haiku' follows on from the thin-skinned, thick-skinned view of interaction. I do not know if it was written by Mary Hughes or not, but it was presented by her as a process leader at a joint meeting involving both the GA Council and GA staff in an attempt to improve the effectiveness of GA governance:

"Waiting to speak
is not the same as
listening."

Process is crucial. Being open to each other involves a temporary lowering of our ego barriers. Temporary, because there is a need to respond openly and fully from our core honesty, but at the same time a real attempt to hear the Other rather than projecting what we think they are saying or ought to be saying. It may be painful, but if we do not truly suspend our self we cannot truly hear one another.

I am firmly convinced that communities of value are necessary for society. Individuals need communities to gain perspective, to receive forgiveness when we fail, to be involved in the healing process of offering forgiveness, and to have faith that the values we live will not die with us. Communities of value are needed for propagating values by increasing our commitments through worship and by increasing our effectiveness through combined action. Communities help us transmit our values through society and down the generations, and in our Unitarian faith this means not just handing on the past, but adding to the store of wisdom with new insights from today's experience.

And that brings me to my second point, which I introduce with a few paragraphs from my GA Anniversary Sermon delivered at St Mark's in 2003, illustrating what I mean with the parable of the Compassionate Jug by Idries Shah, a Sufi mystic who writes for 'westerners'.

"In a hot, dusty, and dark hovel lies a man in agony, made worse by his inability to reach water to quench his thirst. A jug on a shelf on the other side of the room sees his plight and, moved by intense compassion, manages to shift itself to within arm's reach of the suffering man. In his thrashing about, the man discovers the jug and raises it to his lips, only to find that it is empty of

water. In his frustration and anger he throws it against the wall and it breaks into pieces.

“The progress of humanity depends on the productive functioning of value-oriented communities. As Erich Fromm stated in *The Art of Loving*, ‘Love is productive’! Our liberal religious approach has a unique gift to share, and we should be able and willing to share it, but to do this effectively, we each have to search our hearts for the lure, the sense of importance and direction that represents our patterning of our lives in response to a God of Love. This patterning includes action and resource priorities. If our churches do not adequately minister, they will be swept aside by some developing form of community valuing – and will deserve to be swept aside as shards of empty jugs.”

We need communities and Communities need Institutions. For all their failures (and there are many) institutions are necessary for communities to implement their values. Standards may change, but insights do need to be relatively codified for communication. Imagine the energy drag if each morning we had to make a new moral judgment about brushing our teeth, if we had to consider issues like the dentists' lobby, the fluoridation issues, the economic of a system where we have 50 kinds of toothpaste available while a typical Kenyan would be lucky to have one – oh, yes, we Unitarians LIKE these discussions and moral debates, but to have them every morning and evening would be daft. Procedures are eventually developed in the community and institutional guidelines arise. We develop our personal habits and patterns in relation to tooth care. Our congregations are communities where we try to bring values like compassion, truth, equality, justice, beauty, and healing into the world. To do this we need common understandings of courtesy, of procedure, But we also need some content, some shared vision of who we are and how we work towards common goals. We need to open ourselves to each other and we need to struggle together. People need communities and communities need institutions: Our local and national church communities need Annual Meetings and I hope that the Glasgow Unitarian Church AGM that starts in a few minutes will be fulfilling and interesting.

I close with brief reminders of the headings:

Issa haiku "Everything I touch with tenderness, alas, pricks like a bramble": to be sensitive is to expose our self to pain.

Mary Hughes: “Waiting to speak is not the same as listening.” Being part of a discussion involves listening as well as speaking.

Idris Shah’s Parable of the Compassionate Jug warns us that we need content as well as compassion, or as Fromm put it, "love is productive!"