The Secret Language of Connection
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme **– Lacey Stokes**

I love words. I have been using language to create stories, write poetry and compose song lyrics since I was old enough to speak aloud. It's one of my favorite parts of being a worship associate. I get to use my words.

So, you would think, given my adoration of and constant use of words, that communication comes naturally to me. You would be wrong.

When I was a kid, I was labelled the troublemaker. The rebellious one. Looking back, I really wasn't. I had a lot of opinions and I had a lot of feelings that I just couldn't quite give voice to in a way my parents were able or willing to hear. I am 42 now and I still am constantly moderating my "tone" because so often what I had to say was dismissed because this elusive tone wasn't correct. Or I smirked; still not sure what that means. Or I was emotional and it translated to disrespect. I remember being so frustrated. I remember feeling rage that I didn't know what to do with because I wasn't heard.

So when I had something I needed to tell my parents, I started writing them letters. Nobody could accuse me of the wrong tone or facial expression when they were just reading written words. It was a safer way to communicate but I also recognize how much those early experiences shaped my own views of communication and how I show up in communicating with people I love.

Whenever my husband and I have a disagreement, we text our way through it. Those bigger, harder conversations are still really hard for me to have in person, face to face. My anxiety kicks up, I get tongue tied, and as a result, I tend to react rather than respond.

And I'll be honest, I'm also the person who won't leave a voicemail unless I've written a script and gets easily flustered in conversation that requires me to improv. I love words only when I'm in control of them.

I only recently remembered this childhood story I've shared with you, when Dr James Dobson passed away. My parents were big proponents of his work and his book *The Strong Willed Child* was gospel to them when it came to me. When he died, I read hundreds of stories from other people who had suffered the same abuses because of his "parenting" methods and how that had affected them into adulthood. Suddenly this piece just clicked.

How does a child learn to communicate when they're never given the opportunity to speak? When every time they do, it's disregarded, twisted, and punished? It's why I turned to letters. While I definitely was and am strong willed, so many of my own insecurities and unease with communication stem from being told my words were not just wrong, they were not valuable.

But I am not a child anymore and I've found the value of my voice. I use it frequently. Even if I do have to write it down first.

The Secret Language of Connection© **by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Our theme this month is Building Belonging. Last week we welcomed a new program year, returned to two services, and many of us made promises to this community when we shared the water we brought to our Ingathering. Promises, in the form of covenant, lie at the heart of Unitarian Universalism. We don't share the same beliefs, but share promises about how we will be together. These promises invite us to shift our focus from *what* we believe to *how* we live in relationship. It is a spiritual practice that makes belonging possible, not through similarity, but through commitment, accountability and repair. Belonging isn't passive in a covenantal faith. It is something we co-create again and again, especially when it's difficult. In moments of conflict, covenant calls us back and reminds us that we are not alone. Covenant focuses our attention on the relationship rather than belief system.

Some of the promises made to this community last week include: to keep growing, to be present, to work to protect our environment, potlucks, love, to show up, participate, and support those in need, to try….

I'm very much into covenant as a way to build community. I know that the word "covenant" can be problematic, especially for those leaving high demand religions where the covenant was with a punitive God, as interpreted by leaders of the church. But I don't think we throw out the word because it's been abused. I'd rather re-claim it as our own, given we are a promise-making people, prioritizing actions over belief.

Both the Universalists and the Unitarians had what we call "freedom clauses" – an acknowledgement than any set of shared beliefs by the group could not be shared by all – that is, individuals and individual consciences, could and would differ in belief with integrity and still belong. What was shared by all were the agreements we made about how to treat one another. It's a relational system. Now, of course, those agreements could and would be broken on occasion, but there was a path of accountability and repair, the responsibility of belonging.

One of the reasons I love covenants so much is that they reveal shared cultural norms that are often assumed – and when we assume, you may have heard, we make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*. You can only assume cultural norms with those who are most like you, and even then, you make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*. Even people raised in the same family will interpret the norms of that family differently, unless they have been articulated. Articulating our understandings and making promises is what covenant-making is about. This morning, the children in their Religious Education classes are doing just that – talking about how they will be with one another this year in the classes. They're negotiating their own classroom rules. Teachers do that in classrooms, but we rarely do it as we get older, just assuming we know what is expected of us and others. This is how the characteristics of white supremacy culture, for example, get passed on, without our knowledge or consent. Some of us unthinkingly assume things like:

- Perfection is the goal
- Objectivity is possible
- My individual needs are more important than the needs of the group

Until we start talking about those cultural assumptions and make promises to counter them, we unwittingly invite those who share our views into our spaces and exclude those with different worldviews. An example of a covenant created to counter these norms is in our staff covenant where we state that *we seek progress not perfection.* We also try to *create room for what or who isn't here, and work to consider their (largely unknown) perspectives* – that's another of our covenants with each other on staff.

If we've articulated the promise, written down the covenant, then it doesn't matter what the cultural background is of any particular member – all have equal access to the cultural norm we are trying to create, and the covenant itself is created by the group, and it changes over time.

We may decide to start the meeting at the time we've said it starts, or we make a decision to wait five minutes if anyone is missing at that time, or we may not start at all until everyone is in the room. Those are all fine ways to run a meeting, but what is important is the agreement we've made with one another and that everyone agrees to the norm. If you're expecting the meeting to start on time, but the facilitator is waiting for everyone to be present before beginning – well, that can be a very frustrating experience! Covenants help everyone feel like they belong – because they share promises of belonging, this is how we treat one another in this group.

Conversations can be tricky. Sometimes they aren't really about the thing we're talking about. Sometimes the conversation about the paint color in the sanctuary is really about the paint color in the sanctuary, like when our camera couldn't focus with a red backdrop behind the speaker. But also, sometimes the conversation about the paint color in the sanctuary isn't about the paint color. Sometimes it's about power and control – who has the right to make the decision about the color in the sanctuary and why wasn't I consulted? When its not about the paint color but power and control, that's what Nancy McDonald Ladd calls a "fake fight." Because the conversation isn't really about what we say it's about.

In the book, *Supercommunicators,* Charles Duhigg tells stories of people who learned how to communicate better – the doctors who learned how to listen to their patients before advising them (thus inviting the patients to hear them) and even the writers of the *Big Bang Theory* on TV – how they could write characters without social skills that still allow us a glimpse into their feelings. He explains how at the beginning of every conversation is a negotiation. What is this conversation really about? What does everyone want? How will we make choices together? And I love the three questions he offers to help determine the point of the conversation. You may have heard your kids use these questions, as I understand they're being taught in schools these days —- to ask your conversational partner, *do you want to be helped? Do you want to be heard? Or Do you want to be hugged?*

Do you want to be helped – is this a practical conversation – is it really about the paint on the walls? And how do we paint the walls?

Do you want to hugged? Is this an emotional conversation – are you hurt because you weren't consulted about the paint color on the walls and you just want someone to comfort you in the pain of being overlooked and feeling powerless around this decision?

Do you want to be heard – or is it a more social conversation Who Are We? Are we a people who like red on the walls and want them to be colorful and pretty or are we a people who want the walls to be in the background so we can focus on the colorful people in the pulpit?

> "The desire for belonging is at the core of the Who Are We? conversation, writes Duhigg, "which occurs whenever we talk about our connections within society. When we discuss the latest organizational gossip ("I hear everyone in accounting is going to get laid off") or signal an affiliation ("We're Knicks fans in this family") or figure out social linkages ("You went to Berkeley? Do you know Troy?") or emphasize social dissimilarities ("As a Black woman, I see this differently than you"), we're engaging in a Who Are We? conversation."

It's this conversation, I think, more than any other that we Unitarian Universalists have been struggling with over the last decade – with the realization that white supremacy culture, for example, isn't just "out there" but "in here" – albeit far more subtle ways than say, white Christian nationalism.

Many got defensive when we began preaching that white supremacy culture had infected our congregations, too – because we were on the righteous side of the civil rights movement, with our martyrs Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb and the like…It was about identity. And to admit to complicity with the culture of domination shook our identity to the core. We're supposed to be the good guys! Even though our theology is clearly more nuanced than the binary of good guy/ bad guy – our brains still sort the in-group and the out-group. Writes Duhigg,

> "We all possess numerous social identities—Democrat/Republican, Christian/Muslim, Black/white, self-made millionaire/working-class—that intersect in complicated ways: I'm a gay Hindu computer engineer from the South who votes libertarian. These identities nudge us and others to make assumptions. They can subtly cause us to "exaggerate the differences between groups" and overemphasize "the similarities of things in the same group,"... Our social identities push us unthinkingly to see people like us—what psychologists call our in-group—as more virtuous and intelligent, while those who are different—the out-group—as suspicious, unethical, and possibly threatening. Social identities help us relate to others, but they can also perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice."

Of course, I needn't tell you that it's not just UU's struggling with this Who Are We? Conversation? Identity politics have polarized our American landscape – and the recent assassinations of Charlie Kirk and Melissa Hortman underscore that polarization, and the violence of our culture.

"These identities nudge us and others to make assumptions" – and remember what I said about making an *ass* out of *u* and *me*?

I am in the privileged position of being in relationship with most of you in the room. Some of you, it's just a Sunday morning greeting and I might not recognize you on the street. For others, I've been with you as a family member has died or seen you through a crisis. I get to meet new people as they go through the new member classes. So, the truth is, when conversations go badly in the congregation, I often hear about it. I hear about the assumptions people have made that hurt others, and I've been privileged enough to hear from people when *I've* been the ass and hurt someone unintentionally with my words.

“Subtle acts of exclusion” is the term I learned this year at General Assembly, in a membership workshop I took. We commit subtle acts of exclusion on a regular basis. I think it’s even more common in a congregation begun as a fellowship without professional leadership who thinks of themselves as a family. While the metaphor of family can conjure feelings of belonging; it is problematic. Congregations are not families. We reconstitute ourselves each Sunday. Who’s in the congregation and who isn’t changes constantly. It’s a myth that we can know everyone who is the UU Church of Vancouver and that they are our family. Certainly there are chosen families within the congregation, smaller groups of people who have bonded and care for one another as if they were family -but it’s not the entire congregation as there are new people among us any given Sunday.

The desire to belong is real, and we can build belonging by articulating and keeping our promises to one another and holding conversations that are deep and real. I love this quote from researcher, Brene Brown, who said “I was so shocked to learn that the opposite of belonging is fitting in. Because fitting in is assessing a group of people and changing who you are. But true belonging never asks us to change who we are. It demands we be who we are.” Isn’t that a great quote?

If you would like to practice building belonging, practice holding deeper and more meaningful conversations with one another and avoiding those subtle acts of exclusion, I recommend this book by Charles Duhigg. Or listen to a podcast with him on it, or watch a youtube video, or listen to the audio book. We’ll be holding some practice sessions on October 5th and 19th, where you can try out some of his *Supercommunicator* strategies. Our Leadership Discovery and Development team is leading this effort and has acquired books for you to borrow and will be here after church for you to register for these practice sessions. You can come to the first service, go grab a bite to eat, and then join us after the second. Or bring a sack lunch. Whatever makes it easiest for you to join the practice session.

Belonging just doesn’t happen; it is built. Lacey shared how she didn’t feel like she belonged in her family of origin because of those parenting techniques of James Dobson. She is not the only one. We try to create a place of belonging here at church, but for some of the reasons I’ve mentioned, it is not easy to build. It takes effort and practice, commitment, accountability and repair.

Have you ever known someone who was easy to talk to? Exceptionally easy? You loved talking to them because you came away feeling a little smarter, funnier, more interesting? It felt as if they heard you, like you had some kind of bond? Duhigg opens the book with an unremarkable guy, Felix, whom everyone described like that, and whom the scientists studied to learn what he did to be that person.

“That’s why it matters how we treat the world around us,” said the Buddha. “If everything is a part of you, and you are a part of everything, then when you care for even the smallest creature or plant, you’re caring for the whole world – and yourself, too.” Even small actions of care and kindness, of listening and relating, of building belonging, helps us spread love as it goes, helps us pass on the light.