

Finding Community in the Digital Age
August 4, 2013

The blog post was short.

“I sometimes wonder why I never fit in, spiritually and theologically speaking, with those at my church,” it began. “They are all pretty much set in their ways: Democrats are the Devil, non-fundie Christians are evil, other religions are of the devil and don’t know God.”

“I want to address the last thing I wrote, about the other religions,” the writer continued. “I’ve always had my own opinion of their notion of deity but I’ve never shared it because no one would understand. I’ve always believe that all religions know God they just call Him by other names, some call Him “Him”, “It”, “Her,” or a specific name, but I always believed that other religions had a concept of Divinity that was truly divine. Does anyone else believe that?”

I had stumbled across this tiny blog post almost by accident. Some friends had recently introduced me to Tumblr, a website that combines blogging with social networking. Users can easily post text, pictures, and videos with a few clicks. Searching “tags” allows you to find and follow other people that share your interests. I had spent a happy evening finding and following people who shared my passion for my favorite shows and my favorite books.

I found some inspiring artists who posted beautiful photographs of their latest works. I discovered many people with a talent for placing hilarious captions on pictures of animals doing ridiculous things. In short, I was finding all the good things we’ve come to expect from the internet in one place.

On a whim, I did a search for “UU” and found people posting Rumi quotes, Mary Oliver poems, and photos from Coming of Age services. I did a search for “Unitarian” and found more poetry, a few history lessons, and that tiny, ponderous blog post I just read to you.

“Does anyone else believe that?”

I clicked on the blogger’s profile. Not too much information there, as is typical on Tumblr. Many, if not most users, value some sense of anonymity.

The profile picture showed the eyes and trendy glasses of a young woman, probably in her late teens. “I live in South Carolina,” she had written in the “About Me” section. “I like knitting, Doctor Who, and my cat. Not much else to say about me.”

Well, that clearly wasn’t true, I thought to myself. There seemed to be a great deal more to say. Looking over other blog posts, I could see a young woman deeply devoted to her family and her faith community but also questioning the rigid dogma she had been taught her entire life.

She was struggling to reconcile the *fact* that the people in her church were good, earnest, faithful people with the *fact* that they might be wrong about some things.

“Does anyone else believe that?”

The question was motivated by more than mere curiosity. Loaded onto the back of these five words is the isolation that comes from feeling different from those around you. The fear of the rejection that might come if the wrong people discovered her wonderings. The courage she had to muster to give her question a voice and send it out into the unpredictable public forum that is the internet.

In my head, I could picture her in her room 1,000 miles south of me. Text books and dirty laundry on the floor, posters her favorite bands on the walls, a model of the TARDIS on a bookshelf. She sits at a small desk with her laptop and looks for answers to the big questions.

I felt I could see her so clearly because if we substitute distance for time, this young woman is me.

Back in the mid-90's, I was that teenage girl wondering about the big questions, too. What gives life meaning? What really matters? If the world is a reflection of the divine, isn't there a lot of wisdom to be gained from studying Catholic saints, Buddhist sutras, and pagan ritual together? If God is love, then shouldn't the church be celebrating my gay best friend for the beautiful, whole person she is?

“Does anyone else believe that?”

My teenage self, like the young woman from South Carolina, took these questions to the relatively new creature called the Internet.

Countless searches through Netscape lead me to all sorts of interesting web pages filled with stories and opinions on religion and spirituality.

One day, a search even brought me to the homepage of a relatively small denomination called Unitarian Universalist. The rest, as they say, is history.

I hadn't really given that history much thought to be honest. It sounds slightly bizarre to say I stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism on the Internet and 15 years later I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. It's leaving out the vast majority of that journey, including the love and support of this very congregation.

But looking at that young woman's plaintive question on my screen I suddenly realized that the Internet had, fundamentally and profoundly, changed my life just as it was changing hers. That got me thinking about all the people I know who can say the same thing.

As a bit of a disclaimer, I should say that I'm aware of the enormous privilege that is assumed when I speak of online life. Access to the Internet is, by and large, the purview of the middle class. As more aspects of our lives, be they are our work, our socializing, our pop culture references, or the many ways in which we consume everything from music, to fiction, to ordering Chinese take-out, move online, I grow more and more concerned at the widening chasm between the people who can afford to be online and those who cannot.

I'm also aware there are many who choose, for a variety of reasons, not to be online. Perhaps you are among them. I hope that, despite the focus of today's sermon, you will still find something of value here.

Before I get into the good I see coming from the Internet and the digital communities people are building there, I want to speak to a few of the criticisms that we've all heard before. Perhaps some of you are thinking of them right now.

The Internet is often maligned for being shallow, impersonal, cruel, distracting, and generally a waste of time. Some claim the Internet breeds unhealthy self-involvement and isolation. Instead of having actual conversations, people are just clicking "Like" on a Facebook status. Public discourse is being reduced to tweeted sound bites.

Attention is lavished upon those outrageously insulting individuals who make it their business to derail any and all comment threads. Yes, I speak of the dreaded Internet Troll.

The Internet sometimes feels like a lawless frontier where social niceties are ignored and self-interest is king. There are also those studies that show the stress of being “connected” to the Internet nearly all the time via our myriad of portable devices is literally making us sick because there is never a time when we are unavailable. We have the capability to work around the clock and so we do.

All these criticisms have their validity. The Internet can certainly be all of these negative things and more. I would argue, however, as with any community of diverse individuals, the Internet is what you make of it. It is a tool to be used and it is a creative, collaborative community that exists because we choose to participate in it.

A creative, collaborative community made better because of our participation in it. This sounds like the ideal of the congregation! In many ways, online communities can resemble congregations, for good or ill. The Rev. Fred Muir has recently said that Unitarian Universalism, as a denomination, has a choice to make in the very near future over what direction we want to move in. We have a long history, starting with Emerson, of placing the utmost value on the individual. And this is not a bad thing. Where we run into trouble is when we move from respect for individuality to celebration of individualism. This is what Muir calls the “iChurch.”

This is church that is consumed, a product packaged to be pleasing to individual tastes. Muir contrasts the “iChurch” with the vision of Beloved Community as espoused by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Beloved Community is one based on covenant.

As the Rev. Shirley Strong says, “The term Beloved Community is an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power, and respect for all people, places, and things – a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions, which is to say, Beloved Community is shaped by what we know and feel as justice.”

Let me tell you a few of the ways I’ve seen digital communities save lives and work toward building the Beloved Community.

Many of you have probably heard about the “It Gets Better” Youtube campaign started by Dan Savage 2010 as a response to the spate of suicides wherein bullied queer youth took their own lives.

Dan made a video with his partner, Terry Miller, telling youth that life gets so much better after high school, especially for GLBT people. The video spread rapidly across the Internet and thousands of people created their own “It Gets Better” videos. Celebrities, teachers, politicians, -- gay, straight, and everything in between -- all shared their stories of hope. Entire companies such as Pixar and Google made “It Gets Better” videos. And, I’m so proud to say, countless Unitarian Universalist congregations uploaded their own messages letting youth know that there is a religious community out there fighting for them and ready to welcome them with joy instead of judgment. Because of online communities promoting and contributing to this campaign, at risk teens are hearing a message of support when they need it the most.

What we need to be asking ourselves, both online and off, is how are we contributing to the building of the Beloved Community? Whether we are sitting in this historic congregation or sitting in front of a computer screen, how are we engaging with those we encounter?

Are we reaching out in a spirit of mutual support and respect?

Are we seeking out the company only of those who seem most like us?

Are we building bridges or building walls?

Our communities are what we make them.

They serve what we create them to serve.

How will you help create the Beloved Community in all the places you find yourself - among all the people you meet?

So, how did I end up responding to that young woman in South Carolina who loves knitting, Doctor Who, and tearing down the walls of established fundamentalist dogma?

I wanted to tell her that her questions were important; that they mattered. I wanted to tell her that her ability to be curious was going to cause the world to unfurl before her in ways far more complicated and beautiful than she could ever imagine. I wanted to tell her that if she continued to trust herself, to trust that doubt and wondering could be bridges over a chasm and not the chasm itself, she was about to embark on the most phenomenal of adventures, that of being a human being ruled by love instead of fear.

Unfortunately, Tumblr imposes a 140 character limit on responses to questions their users pose. What I ended up writing was, “Hi. You are asking great questions here. You are not alone. Let’s talk.”