

WE GATHER TOGETHER

A Homily Delivered to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, March 25, 2007,

By Bob Bledsoe, Commissioned Lay Leader

We gather together. Those words are pretty specific to what it is we celebrate: being, community, sharing. What more Unitarian or Universal exclamation can there be than that? Equally important is the responsibility the old hymn calls us to, “confirming and committing our passage to be a true affirmation in joy and tribulation when bound to human care and hope.” There is a responsibility to community seldom remarked on. In economics it’s called the Law of Unintended Consequences, the fact that, if I pay my taxes which in turn pay for schools, your children can still attend school, even if you haven’t paid your taxes. Or if you’re assaulted, the police don’t ask if you’ve paid your taxes before they show up to help you. There’s a responsibility we have to one another if we live together. And you know we all live together.

Among the Rainbow Family, which is a loose-knit coalition of many, many groups coming together several times each year but especially around July 4th for a large communal camp-out, what they call variously the Gathering of the Tribes and the Family Reunion, there are famously no leaders. The Family operates purely on the principle that if you see something needs to be done, you should do it. Naturally, this leads to lots of complications and problems—five or six people see the same problem and five or six solutions, none of them completely satisfactory, are tried, each person elbowing the other out of the way. But it also leads to what is doubtless the most beautiful aspect of the Family—the free kitchens.

Every year, at every Gathering, squads of people with no planning outside the nine or ten of them, sometimes as few as three, bring tents and poles and cookpots and bags of rice and vegetables and grains and water and set up outdoor, free kitchens with names like Lovin' Oven, Taco Mike, Rice Empire, the Mudhole, Tea Time, and often ones without any name at all, and feed thousands of people at least three times daily for a month. They will occasionally pass what's called the Magic Hat outside the Gathering to travel out to what they call Babylon, which are the stores outside the Gathering site, to buy more food. But more often they rely on their own stores they hiked in and the bags of rice or bags of rice cakes or loaves of bread or the nine or ten carrots brought in by individuals specifically for the purpose of donating them to the kitchens. There's no quid pro quo to it: one doesn't have to prove one has brought in food before one is fed. One is simply fed. I can tell you, there is no sight more awesome than a line of people, dusty, muddy, thirsty, joyful, ecstatic, clutching a bowl or a cup, waiting for a dollop of what, they don't know, only it will be nutritious, it will satisfy them, and it will be freely given.

This is life in community. This is life together. It's not always singing and good food, of course. Sometimes the people we love or ought to love tick us off. They get on our nerves, make unwelcome demands, or simply make bad decisions over and over again. It would be nice to say "don't lose your temper. Don't grow frustrated with them. Don't snap at them." It would be lovely but it wouldn't be human. Part and parcel of that humanity is human care. It doesn't just mean that we care, it means we have cares. Concerns, frustrations, problems. The everyday stickiness that's being alive. Let's face it, if Donald Rumsfeld taught us one thing, it was that you don't make community with the people you wish you had but with the people you have. Sometimes the people we're ticked off with deserve our ticked-offness. Often we're angry because we should be angry, and to deny it is to deny that the other person matters to you. So get angry, get frustrated, and cherish it. It means you are alive and that the person is real. It means you're in community, and being in community means running up against that wall which is other people. Sartre said "hell is other people." If that's true, then what's equally true is why: that we matter and that other people matter. This is community.

We gather together. We thank one another. It is an honor and a privilege to serve people. I do this, of course, as a teacher and as lay leader. But more importantly, we do this, together, as congregants, as neighbors, as brothers and sisters and parents and children, and as friends. We take the time to feed one another, literally, spiritually, and we do it freely, because it needs to be done.