



North Shore Unitarian Church
... discover meaning together

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A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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FULL-TIME COMMUNITY

This summer I experienced a number of different communities. Each of them had its joys, advantages and limitations as every community does. Sometimes, other people's communities allowed me to drop in and share of it what I could. Other times, I was part of creating a brand-new one, perhaps unique and never to be experienced again. What was the same about them all was that, either for me or everyone, they were part-time communities.

The summer began with a visit to First Unitarian Church of Victoria, which had invited me to guest preach for them the last week of June which is Gay and Lesbian Pride Sunday in that city. One of the fun parts of being a minister is the chance to visit a new community and dust off one of your best sermons to use again; a week off from writing a new one! Hurray! In this case, alas, I'd never led a Pride Day service; so it meant working on new material on the first few days of my holidays. And writing and delivering an untested sermon for an unfamiliar community is a challenge; in the end, it was a joy, though, to experience the welcome and atmosphere of First Victoria, and to have the opportunity to figure out what I have to say about Pride Day after all these decades. An extra piece of their invitation was to speak briefly at the opening of the annual Pride Art Show that has been a Victoria Church project for several years. As yet, I've not had many chances to participate in public events so my part-time community experience with the Victoria Unitarians opened my life in a new way.

Near the end of July, I experienced another form of community when I acted as Minister-in-Residence for the Canadian Unitarian*Universalist Leadership School held at the University of British Columbia. CU*UL School, as it's affectionately called, was organized by conference calls over a number of months between a small group of volunteers dispersed between Thunder Bay and Victoria, plus one Canadian Unitarian Council staff-person. I noticed how its character changed for me when we were finally face-to-face; what was work before now became the fun of a shared project with other human beings. This kind of short but intensive, outwardly focused part-time community can be very powerful and quite exhausting.

When the participants arrived and the program began, a second part-time community was created. I can't speak for the participant experience, although six of our

members were there and you can ask them about it, but with respect to the whole group of staff, teachers, facilitators and ‘students’, it was inspiring to see a community form with a more or less singular purpose: to develop leadership in our Canadian Unitarian churches, specifically those in Western Canada. Some there were able to question or speak in ways they hadn’t before. I got to minister to a small community, finding out how difficult that is in some ways, but also what I could do in a group of that size that wouldn’t fit in a larger church like ours. In part-time communities, people can spread their wings and try out parts of themselves they can’t elsewhere.

I also attended the Eliot Institute this summer. Eliot is an organization that runs family camps for Unitarian Universalists four times a year, one of them being at Naramata in the Okanagan in late June, the others at Seabeck, WA, across Puget Sound from Seattle. These have been going on for 50 years or more, and when I say ‘family camps’, I mean at any one time, you might find three or four generations of a family represented there. People of all ages, with or without families, come together to learn, sing, play, eat, laugh and, on occasion, sleep there; most come for the same week every year. What is most notable about it is that, although clearly a part-time community, those who go regularly feel a depth of affection for the people and the place itself that is rarely found in other communities, even churches. On the psychological principle that intermittent reinforcement creates the strongest of bonds, this part-time community breeds fond and dedicated attachment. A first-timer like me was extended a very warm welcome, yet inevitably there is also a sense of being on the outer rim, though of enjoying and being deeply interested in what the inside is all about.

(Leaving the pulpit) So, having had these various, powerful experiences in part-time communities over the past two months, what is my response? (Click my shoes three times.) There’s no place like home! I may not have ruby slippers on, and there may be mountains where there should be wheat fields, and rainclouds instead of howling tornadoes, but, my goodness, Kansas is looking awfully good this September! And as to my part-time communities, (pointing to the appropriate folks) you, and you, and you, and *you* were there! But now we’re all home – home in our FULL-TIME COMMUNITY.

Now, what do I mean by full-time community other than the obvious difference that our beginning was decades ago; it’s a memory shared by a few of our most precious members, but not by all or even most of us. Likewise, we’re not anticipating closing up shop anytime soon; we may have *ends* that we work toward, but we are free from the limitation of knowing ‘*the end*’. But there is more than that in being a full-time community.

Our church community lives in our minds and hearts. For some this is more vibrant and accessible than for others. We each choose how often we come to be with each other, yet I’m pretty sure that most of us feel we belong to this community every

day regardless of where we are. I, for one, have a continual and active sense of this community as the major focus of my life; I better have that! For you, of course, it's different in degree; you have partners, children, aging parents nearby, not to mention jobs and golf or bridge or soccer or volunteer work elsewhere. But I bet that if you think about it, you, too, can conjure up within yourselves whenever you want or need to the sense that we are all present in your mind and heart. We aren't a nostalgic memory or a passing crowd; we are with each other in spirit full-time.

We work to build that sense of presence and availability. For example, we have a directory of addresses and phone numbers that includes the names of our various leaders and who to turn to for whatever purpose. If you are new and don't have a directory, check in the office to see if we have any right now. If we don't, I assure you that Debbie Leslie – our wonderful Office Administrator – will be making more soon, so keep checking. Our Membership Committee is listed in there; they handle each step of the process from saying hello to a first-time visitor to organizing the ceremonies recognizing our new members. If you're new to us and have questions or want to get more involved to whatever degree you're ready, you can call any of them.

One of the most important lists in the directory is that of the Care and Concerns Committee, the people any of us can call on in a time of trouble, or just when we need a listening ear or a chat over coffee. Oh, and I'm supposed to tell you today that they want to be able to take some food sometimes when they visit those among us under stress. They're (going to – have) put up a sign-up sheet at the foot of the stairs; if you like to make casseroles, or to bake, and can either freeze a couple of spares or be ready to cook when called upon – occasionally, mind you; they won't be calling you every week – please sign up on the sheet and indicate what you prefer to cook. For those who'd like to do this but can't afford it, keep your grocery receipts and you can be reimbursed. There's no point in helping each other if it becomes a burden when it's meant to be pleasure! Both the Membership and Care and Concerns Committees have deepened and extended their work over the past year and have plans to do more.

Under development right now is our plan to take further steps towards imbuing our congregation with the habits and processes of maintaining good relations in our communications. We'll work also on the re-establishment of our small group ministry program, something many of you are eager to do again. These are all examples of how we live out our church's commitment to being a full-time community.

In a full-time community, members share a history and imagine a future together. To talk of shared history might sound exclusive to visitors and newer members, but as long as an open welcome is offered, history-building begins immediately. In this way, even my dabbling in part-time communities in Victoria and at Eliot last summer gave me a sense of sharing their history. In Victoria, someone told me the story about the

development of the Pride Week Art Show, for instance; my participation in it means that I'm now a tiny piece of that church's history. At Eliot, it seemed as though half the fun, at least for long-time Elioteers, was to remember their history – re-telling the old stories, often hilarious ones, of their shared past. By the end of the week, I had an early sense of that history and played a small part in the ongoing story, too.

Our congregation does offer an open welcome, and we all must remember to keep that in mind when we use verbal short-hand or internal lingo. Doing this shows a shared history that *does* exclude others. I made sure today to explain what Eliot is, for instance, and the tasks of the Committees I mentioned; when we all remember to make ourselves clear we invite everyone to be part of our shared story. Another bit of shared history worth mentioning today is our agreement to sell our entire property to a developer on the condition that he can get it rezoned; in fact, we'll be having a congregational meeting after the service three weeks from now so we all can get an update on the project. Fifty-two weeks ago today, we held our historic congregational meeting in which the majority of us voted to sell. Some of our members still disagree with the decision, yet that meeting of minds remains a high mark for many when they think of our church at its best.

Just as important to a full-time community is the sense of a shared future. We, as a community, are not just here for a little while, or till Christmas, or next summer, or till we get our new building. It's an attractive distraction for us to imagine only that far, but in this full-time community we have to imagine and plan for what we'll be for our children when they're adults; or even for two generations from now when we have no idea *who* will be here. But meanwhile, we imagine together what next week's service will be; or how our religious education programs will go this term; or who might be ready to serve on our Board *next* year. In full-time community, we share the knowledge that our church will exist long into the future, apart from whatever will come about for us as individuals.

When we think about the future that we imagine and work toward together, it brings us to the next realization about full-time community. If we are part of such a community then we want to make a commitment to it. We benefit from being part of this community, and so we give to it also, deliberately and thoughtfully – which of course means that we do not all make the same commitment at the same level. Some churches require exactly that: there's a minimum number of volunteer hours you must put in, and a minimum percentage of your income that you must give. If you don't, the minister will call you on the carpet about it. I'm glad I don't have to do *that* with *you* people! Our way is to recognize the freedom of each person to decide what's best. Historically in a number of Unitarian Universalist churches that freedom was warped into a fear of seeking any commitment at all, but let's not make that mistake.

Instead, let's simply *recognize* that to enjoy being part of a community is a sign that we *have* committed ourselves. Our full-time community, to whatever extent we identify with it, is an extension of our individuality out into the world through our connections with others. Our community is part of our heart, and our hearts dwell partly in this community. We each have taken some step or many steps to belonging here, according to what our heart and spirit tells us is right. Others beside us may have moved further in or stayed apart more than we have; full-time community only asks for what we are ready to be or do or give. We see that some of us leave because no community is right for all; individuals change, as does our community and the fit can alter. This is part of community life. We are glad to make room for others who are drawn to be among us and will bring us new perspectives; they will change us as we will change them. For a full-time community lives and evolves.

We are a twelve-month a year church; there is a service every Sunday. In the summer we pull back into a relaxed and smaller mode of operation, but the church is open and available. Now that it's September, we do a bit more than rub elbows as we all squeeze into our beautiful little sanctuary. We ramp up and rev our engines to take off into ten months of fully-functioning church life, our next period of maturation of process, growth in spirit and engagement with the work that cries out for us.

When at the end of our service today, we once again sing our closing song and join hands, take a moment to look into the eyes of those around you. They are your full-time community, as you are theirs. It works because we make it work; it exists because we choose to stand side by side, hand in hand.

May we all continue to create it and sustain it.