

# That's What Friends Are For . . .

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Our theme for the month of August is Sustenance, or that which sustains us. For most of us, the first thing that sustained us was family. Our parents fed us, bathed us, held us, nurtured us and shaped us as we grew into the adults we are today. And for that care, we should be eternally grateful.

However, for a growing number of people, that safety net has shredded and they are adrift. These are the people “in the woods” with whom I work with.

Robert is a tattooed 40-year old man. He looks like a tough guy, a dangerous guy, and the Police say he is, but he is sitting in my car sobbing. “I am so alone!” he mourns, rocking back and forth slightly like a distraught six-year-old.

“My parents are dead. My brother is, too. My neighbors are all jerks and I have no friends. Even my church has closed! I have no one!” He is inconsolable. No words I can offer him change that reality. I keep passing him unused takeout napkins that I keep in my car for such emergencies.

The night before Robert had asked his uncle in Long Island if he could come visit for two weeks or so. He needed to get out of Florida for a while; he needed to reconnect with the only family he had left; he needed to feel loved. The uncle said yes, but I had told Robert “No.”

The reality of Covid-19 made that visit impossible, I had explained 15 hours earlier. I had told Robert that he would have to be in quarantine in New York for two weeks before he could even see his uncle, a frail, wheel-chair bound 90-year old. And there would be huge fines to pay if he didn't comply.

His aunt sealed the deal when she told Robert brusquely that “You are a health risk coming from Florida. Stay away. We don't want you here.”

With his last lifeline ripped from his fingers, Robert was almost suicidal which is why we were in my car heading to Springbrook Psychiatric Hospital where he would be Baker Acted for 72 hours.

We made that drive three times in the last 30 days.

The first two times ended in more tears, anxiety attacks, and self-medicating with alcohol. Alcohol killed both his parents, and Robert was heading down the same path.

He knew it. He hated it—and himself.

“I can't stop! I'm giving up hope. Just like my parents. But if I only had someone to love, and to love me, I know I would be OK. I just want to have a family.”

# An Alphabet of Gratitude: Four Legs and Love – continued

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Wow. The dangerous tattooed felon with anger issues just wants a white picket fence, a wife, a dog and two lovely—probably non-tattooed--children.

Family is that important. Not having family drives tough guys to tears and self-destruction behaviors.

Imagine what not having family does to someone who is 8 years old and in the foster care system...or in a Homeland Security cage somewhere...or in a hospital which is sending visitors away out of due caution...

Or to a person self-isolating in their home, waiting for Covid-19 to go away.

What Robert hasn't learned yet is that family is not always about blood relationships. It's the people in your life who want you in theirs. The people who can accept you for who and what you are. The people who love to see you, and who love you NO MATTER WHAT.

You may have bad hair days, or anxiety attacks, or feelings of inferiority. (Robert keeps asking me why I am helping him. After all, he's such a loser!)

I reply, "I don't think you're a loser. I think you're lost right now. We're working to help you find yourself again. We're working on YOU and you ARE worth it." It calms him momentarily as he considers his worthiness. He's still not convinced.

There's a proverb that says you can't choose your family. You take what fate hands you. And like them or not, love them or not, understand them or not, you cope. Because they are, after all, family!

Then there's the school of thought that says the family you're born into is simply a starting point. They feed you, and clothe you, and take care of you, until you're ready to go out into the world and find your own tribe.

But finding your own tribe can be hard work. It can be frustrating, fruitless, and as in Robert's case, a seemingly insurmountable task.

It is the personal isolation that is the worst for him, and he admits he has no clue how to fix his situation. "I have no coping skills!" he lamented just this morning from his hospital room.

OK. That's something else we can work on when he gets out.

However, finding your own tribe is a task that almost every human being is called on to perform. Often multiple times in the course of their lifetimes.

Leaving the cocoon of the nuclear family and going off to college, or the military?

Entering the work force?

# An Alphabet of Gratitude: Four Legs and Love – continued

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Getting married and starting your own family?

Moving to a new city for your job?

Experiencing the death of a parent, a business, a spouse, a marriage?

Retiring to a strange new land?

Each one of those life events—also called Rites of Passage--demands that you hit the reset button and find a new tribe for yourself. If you're lucky, you'll be able to take some of your previous family and friends with you, but every Rite of Passage is an opportunity to find a new tribe, too.

Finding those wonderful people you want in your life is always work, no matter at what life stage you find yourself, but can be tremendously rewarding, when you find them.

If you're able, look at the people who are here today on Zoom. If you can't see us, you'll recognize us by our voices. We're all from different backgrounds, different places, but somehow we all made it here...to voluntarily be together on this Sunday morning.

I suspect that everyone here today has first come to this church seeking something that was missing in their lives. After all, how many of us actually grew up as UUs? None of us.

So we are all seekers.

Maybe you came seeking people who thought like you, or people who would not put you down for thinking the way you do.

Maybe you came here looking for meaningful conversation, companionship, and camaraderie.

Maybe you came here to worship in an environment that was less constrictive and proscriptive than what you grew up with.

Maybe you came here because you felt you had not been heard before.

Maybe you came here because you were church shopping and you were curious.

Maybe you had an inkling about what Unitarian Universalism stood for, or maybe not.

Maybe you came for the free pot luck lunch we have after services, and stuck around for the rest of it.

Only you know why you came here the first time.

## An Alphabet of Gratitude: Four Legs and Love – continued

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So you came for your own, maybe non-verbalized, reason because what you had been doing wasn't working for you as well as it should.

The bottom line is perhaps you were looking for your tribe.

And your tribe was here waiting for you to find us.

I hope you found what you were looking for here, because when you are in quarantine or shutdown, having people you can call and talk to is truly important. Having a support team to help get over the rough patches can make all the difference.

Even when you're NOT in quarantine, having people you can call and talk to is wonderful, but it is absolutely necessary when we're physically separated and "socially distancing" as we are today.

Having a network of friends to whom you can talk is essential in these times of political upset, societal upheaval, pandemics, and looming climatic disruptions. There are so many distressing things going on, having a sounding board, a trusted friend to talk to, is part of the coping strategies that Robert hasn't figured out. Yet. He's working on it.

Fortunately, we have so many options today that our grandparents did not have in 1917 when another Pandemic swept across the world...for three years. We're only at four months!

It is easy today to stay in touch—if you choose to do so—with phones, computers, Facebook, Zoom, GoToMeeting, Messenger, FaceTime, Instagram, TicToc, and a myriad of new technologies that facilitate the effort. And choosing to stay in touch reinforces the tribal bond.

However, in these times of politically fraught conversation, staying in touch can be tough. Friends of many years are "unfriending" each other over politics.

Which brings up Dottie, a retired nurse and liberal democrat, who was in a quandary. Anna, her friend of 30 years had apparently dropped Dottie from her Facebook friends list. Not once but twice. Apparently over political differences. Even so, the friend kept calling Dottie on the phone and asking her to call.

Spurned twice, Dottie was gun shy. She had not called back.

"What should I do?" she asked me.

I advised Dottie that a friend of 30 years is worth reaching out to. But avoid talking politics.

So she took a deep breath and dialed, hoping for the best. She got everything she hoped for.

# An Alphabet of Gratitude: Four Legs and Love – continued

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Thirty minutes later, Dottie was beaming. The conversation had reconnected the two old friends. It turned out the Facebook unfriending was a technical glitch of some sort, and Anna was genuinely worried about Dottie who had retired to Florida, a Corona Virus hot spot.

They caught up on husbands, children, old co-workers, matters of health. They laughed about long-go camping trips gone awry and choir rehearsals gone bad. They reconnected as only old friends of 30 years can do.

It was wonderful. Their tiny tribe was reestablished, their political differences forgotten in the laughter and in the shared stories.

Both their worlds got a little larger, a little more comforting.

A wise man once noted that Friends are the family you get to choose.

I hope you have chosen to be with us, to be part of us, to be part of our tribe, for we are truly better when you are with us.

By offering mutual support (after all, it's what we all agreed to do when we joined the church), we all become stronger as we lift each other.

Through genuine friendships with each other, we all become healthier.

Through shared conversations, we all become wiser.

Through shared laughter, we bond, and we lighten the load of the world just a little.

I leave you with one thought about why we are a tribe:

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.”

I hope that sounds familiar.

Welcome home.