

## “Connecting in a Disconnected Time”

A Reflection by  
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A few moments ago, Jeff asked all of us to remember to disconnect our devices. What sense would this have made 20 years ago...even ten years ago? Why should we begin worship by “disconnecting”, especially since the focus of our morning worship is connecting?

Moments after I wrote these words—and I was writing at home—the phone rang. It was our grandson, Ollie, who had just turned 11. What did he get for his birthday? Among other items, an iPhone! Okay, it wasn’t an iPhone 8 or 9 or whatever it is the numbers are up to; it was an iPhone 4, but Ollie is skilled enough with such devices that he quickly asked for our phone numbers—landline and mobile—for his newly forming directory. Ollie is more fluent in current technology than I ever dream of being. Yet he also reads and plays soccer and engages in eyeball to eyeball conversation with family and friends. Hopefully he will not become like the young man who told his story in Business Section of yesterday’s *New York Times*.

Kevin Roose describes himself as “a heavy phone user for most of my life”—his young life. “But sometime last year, I crossed the invisible line into problem territory.” He was no longer capable of “reading books, watching full-length movies or having long uninterrupted conversations.” Kevin hired a “phone coach” for an entire month. He committed himself to “phone rehab”, a luxury for most phone addicts. In his words, he had to “unbroke his brain”. In a month, Kevin’s daily phone usage plummeted from five hours to just over an hour. As for the benefits: “I look people in the eye and listen when they talk. I ride the elevator empty-handed... for the first time in a long time, I’m starting to feel like a human again.”

Ergo, we invite you to disconnect so that we might connect. We invite you to leave the ultimately solitary space of high-tech devices to enter the communal space of worshipping together. For those among us who still shrink at the term worship, consider it worth-ship—tending to what is most worthy of our attention. In the words of Kevin’s phone therapist: “Your life is what you pay attention to.” Little did she know she would be quoted as a theologian.

“From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.” These words spoken moments ago hold the wisdom of Phillip Hewett’s life dedicated to this search through spiritual, religious, activist community.

“May you live in interesting times,” echoes the dubious Chinese blessing. I believe that we live in such interesting times that we find ourselves all but incapable of prioritizing what is worthy of our interest, what is worthy of our attention; and our rattled brains move in so many directions that we become victim to a train crash of thought.

How to think? How to feel? How to notice? How to stop, look, and listen? How to connect in a disconnected time?

The culprit is not singular. I don't want to scapegoat technology for the disconnection of our time. Technology is simply a tool, with no value valence other than that which we as humans give it. Just as fire can burn and destroy, so fire gives light and warmth by which we survive. Fire rises from our chalice, the very symbol of this faith that we share, inviting us to come together in meaningful community and consider what matters most.

We are disconnected by technology abused. We are also disconnected by the pace of change in our world intimate and global—change in our families, change in our communities, change in our nation and our larger world. As for resources to make sense of it all, we drown in information, too scattered to take stock of what we value and how our values shape our priorities and how our priorities have become too legion for meaningful focus. By taking stock of what matters, we set priorities that both limit the span of our focus and free us to pay closer attention to issues that matter. In so doing, we build a capacity to digest complex issues at a far slower pace. And when we slow down—when we “stop, look, and listen”—we discern multiple facets of these issues. We see beyond either-or.

Disconnectedness threatens in many modes: in our misuse of technology, in our succumbing to distraction; and in our reacting to information overload with an escape into simplistic thinking.

In the words of Elif Shafak—Turkish novelist, essayist and women's rights activist, “This is a very dangerous crossroads, because it's exactly where the demagogue enters into the picture.” Multiplicity, ambiguity, zero-sum games, all are grist for the demagogue, the authoritarian personality with power to wield it. Such is the nature of threat to mindful connection. Such is the nature of threat to our souls and psyches individually and communally.

A monster-scale culprit in the disconnectedness of our era is “us-them!” We as Unitarian Universalists are culpable. We speak of the interconnected web of all life. We all but boast of how inclusive we are. Here I am: Exhibit A in loud-mouthing these claims. Now I'm stepping out on a limb: How many times have I sung “Standing on the Side of Love” with robust self-righteousness? And how readily have I deferred to the decision to change those words to “Siding with Love” because some among us are not able to physically stand? BUT, we are still “siding” with love. How many sides does love have? You're either on the side or love or the side of ...what? Are we choosing up sides? If I had my druthers, we would sing “Being in the arc of love”. So far, nobody's asked me, but maybe I'll raise my voice at this year's General Assembly of our larger UU world. To be continued...

This time of disconnection is a time rife with taking sides. Stances, yes; please let's take stances, thoughtfully arrived at and open for other perspectives. In those words of Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran:

“I learned silence from the talkative and tolerance from the intolerant and kindness from the unkind.” I'm still learning. I am still learning.

In this time when our aspiring democracy feels so imperiled by the forces of what I perceive as over-the-top demagoguery, how do any of us connect with those who hold stances that fuel these forces? You knew I would get to this, yes? How to connect across a chasm of perspective?

It was about a year ago that one of my daughters and I had a long conversation over a lunch—just she and I—and she shared that she was unable to keep friends who had supported him who shall not be named. I understand this, and I empathize with her, but I am still struggling with how to connect with longtime friends of mine who I know supported this person whom my daughter and I regard as morally reprehensible. Yet I still send Christmas letters to them. I still have phone conversations on birthdays. But if I broach the topic on which we are canyons apart, I hear the response: “I just can’t talk about this. Can’t we just be friends?”

There has to be another way, and I wonder what might happen if I said: “I really would like to learn from you. I don’t need to change your mind. And I don’t expect you to change mine. But I do feel that I can learn from why you view what is happening as you do. Your story will help me to understand you better; and if I understand you better, I believe we’ll have a deeper friendship.”

I wonder if I have not just been a coward in not at least trying to connect beneath a link that rests primarily on memories. Am I also assuming an implicit “us/them” in my current perspective of who they are and what they’re about: “I am right; they are wrong. My stance is moral; theirs is immoral.”

This is when I yearn for clear direction, for wise counsel, so I am grateful for the implicit counsel of Elif Shafak: “I have multiple attachments... And multiple attachments mean multiple stories.”

So what if, rather than asking my friends for the rationale for their opinions, I asked for a story? “Tell me a story from your life that explains to me why you think the way you do now. I want to understand. I want to hear a story that I have never really heard from you.”

Can we turn off our devices? Can we slow down? Can we look into one another’s eyes? Can we listen? Can we hear? Can we stretch our souls into the depths of one another’s stories? How is this possible? Might we respond to the invitation of Margaret Wheatley:

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.  
Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.  
Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know.  
Real listening always brings people closer together.

When we listen with full heart and mind, we are in a state of connection, and we are at risk—precious risk—of transformation.

So may it be and Amen.

**Sources:**

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