

# I NEED YOU TO SURVIVE

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We gather as a liberal religious community, seeking to respect and include all who come through our doors.

In this community, like most Unitarian Universalist congregations I've been a part of, we like to spend a lot of time focusing on our similarities: our common covenant to be with one another, our common humanity, our common understanding that as humans we have both the power and the responsibility to make the world a better place. It is good that we have so much in common, and you won't find me arguing with any of that.

And yet, because as Unitarian Universalists we refuse to say that there is only one right way of looking at the world, one right way of believing, we gather in community despite some pretty dramatic differences with each other.

Differences in theology, differences in life experience and background that make us look at the world through unique lenses, differences in political philosophy, just to name a few.

Thus, it is inevitable from time to time that personalities will clash, opinions will differ, and our trust in one another will be challenged.

In every community, there will be conflict. In every community, there will be times of anxiety and fear. How we deal with these times is vital to our survival and health as a religious institution.

It takes courage and commitment to push through these times, to find a way to live together, to find a way to make those conflicts creative rather than destructive. We can and must find that courage and that commitment together.

First, we must understand that we live in a world of systems. Our congregation is a system—no part of it exists in isolation. And in this system, we need one another to survive.

And I don't think that putting it that way is being melodramatic: I truly believe that we need each other, or at least we need to learn how to need each other.

I was inspired to address this topic after hearing the song offered to us by our choir early last year, in fact the week after first visiting with the Search Committee from this congregation. Consider some the words for a minute:

*"I need you, you need me, we're all a part of God's light. Stand with me, agree with me, we're all a part of God's light.... You are important to me; I need you to survive.... I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you; I need you to survive.... You are important to me; I need you to survive."* (Hezekiah Walker "I Need You To Survive")

And while we can have a spirited debate about what "God's will" is (or if there really is such a thing, even), we are faced with the reality that, on this morning, we have come together as a community of people who are important to one another.

We are faced with the reality that we need each other to survive, and, because of that, we've come together in a complex system of actions and reactions—a system that takes some intention for us to get right.

An important part of systems theory is that change and anxiety go together. There is no such thing as anxiety-free change. I'm well aware, for example, that every time a new minister enters a congregation, the change in leadership and perspective and personality causes anxiety.

When any congregation—no matter how healthy or well-intentioned—has to deal with changes like these on a regular basis (as this congregation has for the past decade or so), it becomes even more important to understand how our anxiety is being played out in the relationships we have with one another.

And even when most everyone is excited at the arrival of a particular new minister, as folks around here have been these past few months (something I am profoundly grateful for), the change still brings anxiety, and anxiety in a system needs to be managed.

Note that I said “managed,” and not eliminated. Anxiety is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Unchecked anxiety, however, is.

On the one hand, a system that spends all of its time reacting to the most anxiety is unhealthy. On the other hand, a system with no anxiety is dead. The same can be said of our lives and our families—too much tension is never a good thing, but too little and we hardly have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. And, of course, this is a time of year that provokes anxiety in many of us—I know that my visit to Home Depot last week to buy some Christmas lights had me hyperventilating within fifteen minutes!

So in our congregation, as in our lives, we need to learn to manage anxiety.

But how do we deal with and manage anxiety in a healthy way?

Today, I offer you three things that our congregation can do to manage our anxiety as a group. All three, I hope are things that you can also do in your own personal life as well.

First, we must as a congregation focus on our mission and vision. What are the core values our congregation comes together to support? How do we live those values in the world?

Starting in the new year, we will be spending a lot of time thinking about those questions—all will be invited to a special “start-up” conversation designed to help focus my ministry, our Committee on Ministry will be sponsoring conversations, I will be preaching a special three-part sermon series, and our Board and Finance committee will be creating different ways in which we can map out these things for our Fellowship.

All of these conversations will have as their central goal focusing us on the reason we come together as a community, and developing together a common vision for the future. All of them are opportunities to become energized, to express concerns, and to reduce your anxiety about what might come next for our Fellowship.

In your homes and families, there are parallels to mission and vision. At home, you can focus on the meaning of family, and what your most deeply-held values are. By living from your deeply-held values, you reduce the dissonance in your life that happens when you try to do something that is different from those values.

The second way we can manage anxiety is by working together to develop the practice of deep listening.

Over the past year, this Fellowship has been introduced to one philosophy that helps us to do this with one another. The tenets of non-violent communication, also called compassionate communication, ask us to listen with open hearts and minds, and to speak from our own needs and feelings. As described on the website for the Center for Non-Violent Communication:

“We are trained to make careful observations free of evaluation, and to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us. We learn to hear our own deeper needs and those of others, and to identify and clearly articulate what we are wanting in a given moment. When we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt, and needed, rather than on diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth of our own compassion. Through its emphasis on deep listening—to ourselves as well as others—[non-violent communication]... fosters respect, attentiveness and empathy, and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart. The form is simple, yet powerfully transformative.” (Center for NonViolent Communication website, <http://www.cnvc.org/nvc.htm>)

We will be re-visiting compassionate communication in the new year as well. In the meantime, we can all learn to listen deeply—to our own needs and feelings as well as to the needs and feelings of others—and in doing so, become more compassionate.

The last way to manage anxiety in our congregation and in our lives is by cultivating in our midst what is called the “non-anxious presence.”

This is easier than it sounds—OK, maybe it doesn’t sound so easy, either. Being a non-anxious presence is hard, but it’s worth it. It requires that sometimes we just hear what’s going on around us.

Rather than giving in to the tendency to react to everything around us, sometimes we need to just hear. Rather than being swept up in a swirling spiral of heightening anxiety, of action and reaction and further reaction, sometimes we have to short-circuit the spiral by stopping ourselves from contributing to it.

The practice of deep listening is the first step. The practice of non-reactivity, though, is needed as well. Margaret Kornfeld, in the reading we heard earlier, quote from the Tao te Ching, in which it is written:

“Do you have the patience to wait  
till your mud settles and your water becomes clear?  
Can you remain unmoving  
till the right action arises by itself?”

(Tao te Ching, 15)

Do you have that patience? Do you have the courage and commitment to learn a new way of being with one another? Do you have the courage and commitment to admit that you need someone else, and in doing so open yourself to a new way of being?

It has been said that courage is the ability to feel fear and anxiety and act despite it.

The artist Georgia O’Keeffe famously said that “I have been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I have never let it stop me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.”

Eleanor Roosevelt once said on this same topic that: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing, which you think you cannot do.”

It takes courage to try on a new way of being with one another—a less-anxious way.

It takes courage not to react when someone is pushing your every button.

But courage is not always easy to come by.

To act despite one's fears goes against all that fear represents. This is why the key to courage in my experience has always been trust. Trust that if I take a calculated risk, things will be OK.

My friend Bob once described his enormous courage in making a dramatic career change as "falling naked on the universe and trusting that it will catch me." That's a lot of what taking a risk is, isn't it? Trusting that no matter how big the leap is, the landing will be soft.

Trusting that the universe, your God or Goddess, your family, or your community of supportive friends and loved ones, will be watching out for you as you step into the unknown.

And trust, in a community of faith, takes a commitment. A commitment to sit with one another through difficulty. A commitment to be in relationship one another even when it's hard. A commitment to behave in ways that let the world know that we mean when we say when we speak of the undivided human family. A commitment to being part of this Fellowship.

Conflict and anxiety are not, in and of themselves, bad things. Both of them can lead to productive change. They can challenge us to live up to our principles, to remember our most deeply-held values. They can help us create a common vision for the future.

In order to see the good sides of conflict and anxiety, we are faced with several challenges.

We are challenged, in our community as well as our personal lives, to sit with conflict. To summon all of our courage and strength to our best not to react to places of high anxiety.

We are challenged, in our community as well as our personal lives, not to make conflict personal. We can disagree without attacking, we can engage each other over areas of differing vision without making things unsafe for one another.

We are challenged, in our community as well as our personal lives, to be open, honest and direct with one another—but do that with compassion and empathy. It serves us no good to go behind one another's backs, or to bury our disagreements right below the surface, waiting to erupt.

All of these things take pushing through our resistance to conflict. It takes a lot of courage to tell someone your problem with them instead of telling someone else. It takes a lot of commitment to change the way we react to something for the good of our community.

Today, I ask each of you here for that commitment. The commitment to understanding that we need one another to survive.

Together, we can nurture one another, we can stand with one another, we can challenge one another, and we can give each other the strength, the courage, and the commitment to do this thing called Unitarian Universalism, this thing called Fellowship, this thing called community, and to do these things well.

May it be so.