Brave Enough to Say Hello by Terry Choyce

 Sermon for UU Church March 25, 2018

When my daughters were growing up I used to tell them “Everyone in the world wants to be your friend.” This was not a lie or an exaggeration. We are social beings and we all want friends. It is vital to feel loved and connected to people. We need a sense of belonging.

The theme for the month of March here at the UU Church has been risk. For many people making friends is scary, because they are afraid of being judged and they feel insecure and vulnerable. It often takes courage to say “Hello” to someone new. So many people perpetually feel alone, different and disconnected.

An article in the Science Daily stated: “research presented at the 125th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association showed, Loneliness and social isolation may represent a greater public health hazard than obesity and their impact has been growing and will continue to grow.

Being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need -- crucial to both well-being and survival.  Approximately 42.6 million adults over age 45 in the United States are estimated to be suffering from chronic loneliness. In addition, the most recent U.S. census data shows more than a quarter of the population lives alone, more than half of the population is unmarried and, since the previous census, marriage rates and the number of children per household have declined.

“These trends suggest that Americans are becoming less socially connected and experiencing more loneliness," said Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad. She reported that many studies have shown that greater social connection is associated with a 50 percent reduced risk of early death.

 There have been 70 studies representing more than 3.4 million individuals primarily from North America but also from Europe, Asia and Australia, which examined the role that social isolation, loneliness or living alone might have on mortality. Researchers found that all three had a significant and equal effect on the risk of premature death.” (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/08/170805165319.htm>)

For the sake of our physical and mental health, what do we do to feel more liked and loved? The answer is fairly easy and learnable, but can take confidence and courage. Mostly it is simply a matter of you saying “Hello.”

For those of us who are fairly extroverted, this is no problem. For people that tend to be shy, this feels scary. What do you say after “Hello?” Here are some helpful tips:

Make eye contact with the person you are talking to. Smile. If possible have a straight but relaxed posture. Talk slowly and at a good volume. And ask a question or two that are relevant to both of you. For instance, after the service today ask someone what song they liked the best. Or ask them if they found anything meaningful in the sermon. Or ask how they like the new kitchen renovations. This church is perhaps the best place to meet someone who may become a friend because you have a common interest, just by both being here.

One of the friendliest people I have ever met is Patricia Watson. She was travelling recently and was in a hotel lobby when a woman came up to her and said “I can tell you are family.” Patricia laughed and asked her why she thinks that. The woman’s reply got them talking. The next day Patricia went to church with her and she ended up singing a solo – something Patricia loves to do. She and the woman will be long-time friends, even though they live far apart. They are now like family, and will be using Facebook and emails to stay connected.

Here is the card that Pat freely gives out wherever she goes. It says:

Who you are and what you do is greatly appreciated. Thank you. Have a beautiful day.

To prepare for this talk I read the book Talk to Strangers by David Topus. He wrote “Genuine curiosity is the lifeblood of good relationships. Showing interest in another person – interest that is wrapped in a genuine desire to discover more about him or her, and to get to know that person – without judgement. This is perhaps the single most critical ingredient in successful relationship building.” Ask good questions, listen intently, and have appropriate responses that reflect your knowledge and interests.

So let’s say you are in a dentist’s waiting room or in the airport, and the person next to you is reading a book. Simply ask them if they are finding the book interesting or enjoyable. That may start up a nice conversation. But if the person ignores you or just gives you a one word answer, don’t take it personally. Not everyone feels comfortable talking to a stranger, so don’t push it. And don’t get discouraged. Try again at another time or place with another person. Sometimes making friends takes practice, patience, and perseverance.

This week I read a great article by [*Katherine Schafler*](https://www.thriveglobal.com/stories/www.katherineschafler.com)*who is a psychotherapist, writer and speaker.  She quoted 4 important questions by* Maya Angelo: “Do you see me? Do you care that I’m here? Am I enough for you, or do you need me to be better in some way? Can I tell that I’m special to you by the way that you look at me?” These questions reflect your need to be known. And they show the importance of being present to a person, and not being distracted and impatient.

Ms. Schaffer writes “Presence is the incredibly simple part of the human experience that's getting lost in the modern rush.  Taking the one extra second to see a person is the kind of quality that shapes your mood for the better after a bad news day. It's the secret to the people we find so charming, it's what the best leaders do -- helping people feel seen and valued will totally shift your life.

We can all get by without connection, at least for a little while, but if we really want to thrive, we have to connect to each other.

**Connection is not based on how much time we spend with someone or what we do with them, connection is always based on quality of presence. “**

My talk today is in alignment with the first 2 UU principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person; and

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

I believe that every person is basically good and every person deserves to be respected. That means YOU! Love, respect and care for yourself. Feel good about who you are. We all have faults and imperfections, but I can guarantee that no one pays as much attention to them as you do to yourself. Relax and be proud of yourself, take care of yourself, and find people who will cherish you.

Now let’s take a moment to look around the room. … Make eye contact and smile ….Every person here has worth and should be treated with justice, equity, and compassion. …... Look at every person as a friend or a potential friend….. This is your church community, your church family…. When this service is over, find someone and say “Hello.”

I’d like to end with this blessing by the Irish writer and theologian John O’Donohue. It is from his beautiful book Anam Cara, which means “soul friend.”

May you be blessed with good friends.
May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.
May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where there is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.
May this change you.
May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold in you.
May you be brought in to the real passion, kinship. and affinity of belonging.
May you treasure your friends.
May you be good to them and may you be there for them;
May they bring you all the blessings, challenges, truth,
and light that you need for your journey.
May you never be isolated.
May you be in the gentle nest of belonging with your anam cara.