

CONTEXT

Shaping the communities and
culture that shape us

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
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There is, in the ancient Book of Ecclesiastes, a statement whose banality only underlines its truth, one that hardly needs stating. A piece of drivel almost anybody could have said better: maybe that's why it's worth quoting. Here it is:

Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone?¹

Gee thanks. I think we knew that. Maybe it's memorable because it states the blindingly obvious — with blinding plainness. But there's more to this than staying warm or, if you fall, having hand getting up again.

In a supremely hopeful book titled *Non-Zero*, Robert Wright depicts cultural evolution — the great advances in human achievement — virtually *pouring* from human societies that were *big* enough, *concentrated* enough, so that they could function like a many-celled brain, with all of its members participating in a creative interaction. And he shows how other societies — too small, too sparse and isolated — remained stagnant or died out. No stimulation, no creativity. It's true of just about everything — even bacteria. They solve problems by interacting, forming a kind of collective mind smart enough, stimulated enough, to grow to the next stage.

We aren't likely to do what must be done in these times in isolation. While we face a crisis truly like none humanity has ever faced — human communities, including religious congregations, form the context for our being and becoming — for good

THE READINGS

from *Emerson's* essay,
“Friendship”

A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. . . . Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow-man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds. I knew a man, who, under a certain religious frenzy, cast off this drapery, and, omitting all compliment and commonplace, spoke to the conscience of every person he encountered, and that with great insight and beauty. At first he was resisted, and all men agreed he was mad. But persisting, as indeed he could not help doing, . . . he attained to the advantage of bringing every man of his acquaintance into true relations with him. No man would think of speaking falsely with him, or of putting him off with any chat of markets or reading-rooms. . . . To stand in true relations with men in a false age is worth a fit of insanity, is it not?

Doris Lessing
from *Briefing for*
a Descent in Hell

pp 162ff

. . . [Y]our saying what you did that night began a remarkable process in me and this coincided with a similar process in a close friend of mine — and as we are beginning to see, in more than one of the people closest to us. . . . Can a yeast not know it is a yeast? [I]t is like the spreading of a yeast or some sort of chemical that has started working in one place and then moved out, feeding and inciting . . . We have been wondering, too, about the others who were there that night. Did some of them go away feeling as if they had been infused with a new sort of intelli-

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or for ill.

Consider what the context — a human community — can make of us. What it can make of us when it's founded *not* on some nightmare of lies and violence, like totalitarian societies that have so often made history's monsters of their people — not on the rock-rigid dogma of other ages; — but on highly evolved human principles, on faith in each other, faith in the possible; organized on the principles of love and care; guided by a creative vision of hope.



Emerson recognized how rare a treasure a truly *creative* culture is when he wrote of the more common interpersonal reality:

All association must be a compromise, and, what is worst, the very . . . aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other. What a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and gifted!

But it need not always be this way, and Emerson, who was famous for his friendships, could recognize the shallow disappointment because he also knew the profound depths of what *can* happen between people, and he tells what it is about the real thing. He has many notable friends in mind, but especially he is referring to the poet Jones Very, who allowed no one to be false in his presence. Such honesty may not work well at cocktail parties, but I doubt Jones Very ever went to one. Here Emerson is talking about the role of Truth as a central element of friendship:

A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. . . . Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow-man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds. I knew a man, who, under a certain religious frenzy, cast off this drapery, and, omitting all compliment and commonplace, spoke to the conscience of every person he encountered, and that with great insight and beauty. At first he was resisted, and all men agreed he was mad. But persisting, as indeed he could not help doing, . . . he attained to the advantage of bringing every man of his acquaintance into true relations with him. No man would think of speaking falsely with him, or of putting him off with any chat of markets or reading-rooms. . . .

gence? . . .

Every person sitting there on hard chairs in front of you felt as if his or her potential had been left unfulfilled. Something had gone wrong. Some painful and wrong process had been completed and had left them, and even after an expensive schooling — most of those present were middle-class people — defective, unfulfilled, if not warped.

I was as if stung awake. I did not sleep. And I sat by the window that night and I thought: Don't let it go, don't forget it. Something extraordinary did happen. . . .

And when I returned home to my flat in London it stayed with me. What stayed? Not the words . . . It was the feeling of the quality of what [was] said. It went with recognition, as if I had been reminded of something I knew very well. I was possessed with a low simmering fear that I would forget again, let go . . . It was the same feeling one has after waking from a strong dream which one knows has importance for oneself, or for a friend. You wake fighting to keep the dream, its flavour, its texture. Yet within a few minutes of waking, that country of dream has gone, its taste and reality has drained away into ordinary life. All you have left is an intellectual conviction held in a set of words. You want to remember. You try to remember.

But *I was* remembering. It was as if, in any moment of the day that I chose to revive it, there was a bridge across from that heightened moment . . . I began consciously looking about me for that quality in other moments of life. Like testing one metal with another, ringing one substance on another apparently dissimilar. I had been stung awake by that night, and now I was restless and searching, and I was in a fever in case this restlessness might drain away like the afterglow of a useful dream and leave me tranquilly dead again.

To stand in true relations with men in a false age is worth a fit of insanity, is it not?

I have contemplated often the community of people who gathered in Emerson's parlor in Concord, Massachusetts, and the culture that was created there. How could so few people be responsible for so much advancement of human culture and consciousness? Among them was Margaret Fuller, the first literary critic in an American newspaper (Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*) whose *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* broke ground for modern-day feminism; and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who ran the only bookstore in Boston that sold foreign-language scholarly works, where the Transcendentalists often gathered, and who introduced the kindergarten to America; and Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May), who led a revolution in the education of children (with help from Fuller and Peabody); and Henry Thoreau, the great naturalist and anti-slavery activist, the influence of whose *Civil Disobedience* seems to widen with the passing years beyond its well-known impact on Gandhi and King; and Moncure Daniel Conway, the great radical religious and abolitionist leader whose influence spanned the Atlantic; and Charles Sumner, arguably the greatest political leader of the era and the most uncompromising advocate of black Americans; and Theodore Parker, the fearless Boston minister whose congregation of 7,000 included escaped slaves, abolitionists, laborers, and thinkers, whose printed sermons inspired Abraham Lincoln, and who formed the "Committee of Vigilance" to rescue slaves captured under the Fugitive Slave Law and set them free; and leaders of a generation of religious visionaries who would transform the ossified Unitarian movement into a powerful vanguard. Why would so many visionaries and great leaders come from one little town?

It's a matter of consciousness, embodied and transmitted by the intersubjective culture created in a community of people.



For very long ages, human culture was defined by authoritarian rules and belief systems. Human consciousness advanced, though of course not everywhere. But our Unitarian Universalist movement represents a new kind of culture, incorporating the values of scientific, rational, free inquiry from the 18th-century Enlightenment, and beyond that, the values of pluralism, diversity, nonjudgment, and respect, a wave that emerged in, like, the 1960s. That's progress — it's a real transformation — but it's time for another advance. That breakthrough has also brought a kind of inherent narcissism that cultivates the attitude that "*it's all about me.*" Far too often, congregations resemble clubs (existing for the pleasure of an entitled inner circle) or a store (where I expect to get what I want because, dammit, the customer is always right!).

What would it be like to engage with others in a place beyond the boundaries of our personal dramas?

I wonder: What would it be like to be somewhere where you could communicate from a part of your self that is absolutely free from self-consciousness, that is fearless, uncorrupted, and passionately interested in the truth?

It's in settings like that that human beings begin to reach their finest potentials — literally creating a new edge of the possible through the act of communication itself. You find yourself unusually awake, oblivious to the passing of time. Something bigger than an interaction of egos is going on, and when the conversation falls into stale opinions or personal obsessions and agendas or theoretical abstractions, something about this new context that you have created together refocuses, returns to the inspired passion, focused intensity, and evolutionary tension. You feel a kind of clarity that can slowly widen the scope of the dialogue to embrace all the best and highest in you and, beyond that, a breadth and

depth and scope that's breathtaking.

Sometimes there can be a quality of communication that reaches beyond ego, something fresh, and authentic, and luminous. But it never happens, and this kind of enlightened mind, will never happen until the ego has stepped aside. It happens in a context created between people in a community.

It's not just a subjective experience. It's an *intersubjective* experience. The difference between the one and the many disappears and the enlightened mind becomes one voice speaking to itself. In an awakened context like you can sense the presence of a higher consciousness that can be revolutionary in its potential. Something ignites between you, and among you, and through you, that couldn't happen in the most brilliant of minds alone. That's where we find out how to create the future. That's where we finally see that we *can*.



A congregation that would be a transformative spiritual community must ask something of its members, must uphold a higher standard than the world outside its doors. Its members must share a consuming sense of mission. It won't be comfortable for everyone and it will constantly challenge members' assumptions and egocentrism.

And all the business, and all the meetings, and all the committees and budgets, will embody the values and vision at the core, and be carried on for the sake of those values and that vision. There are always those who mistake the plumbing for the water. When that happens, the institution is unlikely to dare to do or to be what the times require.

Yet — when it happens — a congregation can be a field for enlightenment and for the unfolding of human possibility, providing members with *a context* within which their individual life-work can become clear and find support and collaboration. It's in such a context that a compelling vision can come into being.

Something like that happened in that parlour in Concord. And they awakened to the situation of the world around them and the unfulfilled potential of their times. They brought their spiritual resources to bear on that moment, but much more, they drew, in their gathering, vision and energies beyond their own religious tradition. They fired a dramatic further unfolding of that religious tradition. It could never be the same again.

And they found at the core of their gathering an inner silence, and came to love it, and out of that their words and deeds came. Because their lives and their life together was incandescent with something that ultimately defies any language we have or can invent.

I have felt it and known it and those moments mean more to me than anything else in my life. I have a very fresh and vivid memory of a gathering not long ago, a conversation of such breadth and depth and reach and potency that when it ended, naturally, as if we were an orchestra at the end of a great score, we could only sit in silence.

Maybe you have experienced what I'm talking about. Maybe it's happened here. Maybe you yearn for it.



It won't come automatically just because you're around other people who understand this and value it, but it sure helps to live within a community that aspires to this kind of consciousness, and supports it when it shows up.

What is required is a fundamental intent about the meaning and purpose of our lives. Not "being ready," not perfection.

To quote the great twentieth-century Indian revolutionary, philosopher, and mystic Aurobindo, "Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which [Life] offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it." A community that has become a context for our *becoming* and our unfolding will discover that

something divine in you, draw it out of you, not let you rest until you develop it and use it.

We are what we are. A greater purpose calls us just as we are, to enlist our best energies in its service. That intent, and not perfection, is what's required. Each of us must be able to say: *this is my work and gift*. The communities we must create will make room for that gift and engage it.



In such a context you learn to speak from your own inner depths and not superficially. In authentic spiritual community, we learn from each other, are challenged by each other, are held to high purposes by each other.

But such a community isn't for everyone. Many liberal religious communities run aground here. We don't want anybody to be unhappy with us. And to the extent we care about offending or disappointing no one, we will excite nobody. As for our faith community, there will be no *there* there.

The choice to join a community of purpose and vision must therefore be a serious matter. Such a community has a right to ask that one's subsequent participation be of a higher quality than, say for example, the *obstructionary*, in which the participant engages for no particular reason other than to enjoy the delicious feeling that one is able to obstruct. Nor is any

single member of such a community entitled to veto its evolution and change, for better or worse.



When communities of vision gather — there's a lot at stake. The crisis never really goes away: Aurobindo says, so very truly in his poem "Savitri": "All we have done is ever still to do."

What must we do? First, recognize where we are, what is this moment in which we live. To do so is to begin to understand the meaning of our individual lives, and of the communities we create.

We have to want it, to grasp the surpassing worth of it.

What it will take is more than just an individual transformation. What's required now are communities of people guided by a different vision, living by different terms and conditions, supporting and rewarding different values.

When it happens, we will know with an assurance we've never known before that the world we dream is actually possible, and that our lives can take on the quality and force of that dream.

¹ Ecclesiastes 4:9-11, Revised Standard Version.

MEDITATION & SILENCE

In this silence

In this gathering

Beyond all the noise and tumult of these separate lives of ours

In the unbounded depth of this moment

Is held

all possibility

all the sweep and power and magnitude

of what can be

of the world that will be

of what we may be and do.

Let every mind and heart awaken as if with a new quality of intelligence

Let the doors of our perception open

to the power and promise held in this moment of recognition.

May we see and hear and remain awake

And not forget

May our senses not be again dulled

Hear and know and recognize

In this silence

In the immensity beyond this silence

- SILENCE -