

A Place for the Quiet Ones

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, MD

This week I had yet another epic battle with a nemesis of mine. No, it wasn't an argument with anyone in person or online. It didn't involve shouting or making inappropriate gestures at the TV. In fact, even though I dislike this nemesis intensely – I am utterly dependent upon them. I would go so far as to say that I cannot live without this nemesis in my life. So who or what is the object of my disdain? Grocery Shopping. I hate shopping for groceries. I don't mean I dislike it – I hate it. In fact, there are times that I have gone hungry to avoid doing this one ordinary, household chore – buying food for oneself. Let me tell you why I have this curious aberration. . Most grocery stores are not designed for people like me in mind. Most of them are so large you need roller blades to get easily from part of the store to another. The noise is constant, whether from the Muzak playing or the announcements blaring, or the hum and buzz of dozens of appliances. I can make it through fruit and vegetable section pretty well, but by the time I round the corner to the cereal aisle – I feel like I need a light sabre to help me cut through the aisle of being completely overwhelmed.. There I am confronted with dozens and dozens of choices; all these colorful boxes seem to be shouting at me at the same time. Buy me! Pick me! Although I have one cereal in mind, the choices are dizzying, the music grating, the children in the aisle are screaming, and I – overwhelmed by so much stimulation, sometimes just leave without buying a thing.

I used to think that my experience was unique. That there was something wrong with me; a defect; overwhelmed by too many choices and feeling slightly ill by what is a completely normal experience – going to get groceries. It wasn't until I learned more about my particular condition that I realized – that my symptoms are part of a condition shared by about one third or one half of the population, depending on which study you read. It's a condition that is the least understood, the most misdiagnosed and often the benefits of which are underappreciated. And what is this condition – it's introversion.

Now the link between the cereal aisle and introversion may not be readily apparent, today, I'm going to make that connection for you. Today's sermon was purchased by Jamie Harms as part of the 2019 Fall Fundraising Festival. Thank you Jamie!! I had offered to preach the sermon topic of your choice. In the past when I've done this, I've been thrown some curveballs. One member wanted me to preach about weeds; another Cyrano De Bergerac. It's been a challenge writing about something that interests another person, but not necessarily ME! – but this one – this request was different; because it's so personal. And it's important for UUCA to examine how we do church, and what you expect from your ministerial and other leaders as you enter the next chapter of your life. So this sermon is both for the introverts in the room; and for those who are extroverts; it's also for those who are colleagues, partnered and/or friends with introverts. This is an opportunity for us as a community to get to know one another in a deeper, more meaningful and more intentional way.

We often speak about this church as a place where all that makes us unique as individuals is not dissolved in an easy bromide which we frame as Building Beloved Community, but where our uniqueness is part of a greater whole. So this morning's sermon will explore the spiritual questions posed when we gather together as people from so many walks of life and how to make space for each other's unique qualities.

Most of us are familiar with the Extrovert and Introvert polarity. Adam McHugh, author of *Introverts in the Church*: traces its origins back to two people who coined and made popular the word. He says “We all have two dead European psychologists dueling in our heads. In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud and his disciple turned rival Carl Jung, clashed over the nature of introversion. For Freud, introversion indicated an unhealthy self-preoccupation. It was a pathological step towards narcissism, a disorder that involves obsession with the self to the exclusion of others, a habitual turning away from the outside world...Carl Jung by contrast, considered introversion a healthy

and normal trait. (As) part of his collective-unconscious theory, which concerns the general psychological patterns shared by humankind, introversion (a term he coined) was an introspective orientation, wherein a person finds primary energy within the self.”¹

In her book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain describes what she calls the Extrovert Ideal: “the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha and comfortable in the spotlight The archetypal extrovert prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. He favors quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong. She works well in teams and socializes in groups. Introverts feel “just right” with less stimulation; extroverts enjoy the extra bang that comes from activities like meeting new people, skiing slippery slopes and cranking up the stereo. Extroverts are comfortable multi-tasking and risk-taking. They are the people who add life to your dinner party and laugh generously at your jokes. They're comfortable with conflict, but not with solitude.”²

Introverts then – are highly sensitive to overstimulation. For an extrovert, something as simple as the hundred different kinds of granola represents a vast landscape of possibilities. For an introvert, it is simply too much information. Now, I want to acknowledge that if you consider yourself an extrovert – this sermon is not intended to diminish or dismiss you. To find an extrovert in church is actually a rare thing. It's the extroverts among us who are often more comfortable speaking up at congregational meetings; at leading the charge at a rally or grabbing the megaphone at a march. I don't know if she would have considered an extrovert, but I remember when I first met member Wendi Winters, who was killed in the Capital Gazette shooting, that I was in the presence of a true extrovert. She immediately had me signed up to receive the Capital Gazette before I even knew exactly what it was. She recruited me to attend the blood drive before I knew it was happening that year AT OUR church; she was a whirlwind of energy and activity; and after talking with her for an hour, I was alternately excited and jazzed up -- and

exhausted. Wendi's energy was pure extroversion and because of that, she got things done. She wasn't afraid to put herself out there and to organize people, places and things. I didn't realize it at the time, but some of my exhaustion when dealing with Wendi was managing this very polarity; of introvert and extrovert and knowing how to maximize the gifts of each.

Church is a place where we can explore and expand our own nascent gifts and talents. And yet, the way most churches are organized they tend to favor the minority of extroverts among us; those who are self-starters and who are comfortable standing up and speaking into a microphone. What Jamie and I explored while talking about this sermon were the ways in which church does not serve the needs of those among us who are quieter, more reserved and when we mistake that reservedness for either shyness or aloofness.

Case in point, I've been either the minister of or attending churches for most of my adult life. At the beginning of many church services, there is a time when you are supposed to turn and greet your neighbor; pass the peace; give them a hug; say “I'm so glad you're here...” As an introvert, that simple act has been excruciating. It's a learned skill and it's easier when you know people; but for many years, I would dread that portion of the service. Because introverts cherish deep connections and eschew small talk, even the simple act of passing the peace as they call it in some Christian churches is difficult. While I was in seminary, I attended a liberal African Methodist Episcopal church on occasion, because one of my colleagues was a student minister there and because I loved the preaching and the music. But the non-stop energy; the demanding pace and rhythm of the service and the preaching would leave me – again, both exhilarated and exhausted. I'd have to go home to my studio apartment, close the blinds and take a nap after Sunday services. Like all introverts, I needed a place to be quiet and alone and to reflect on the powerful feelings that the service had aroused in me.

When Rev. John, Leika and our music team plan worship services, we often think about the overall flow of the service that month; and we keep

¹ McHugh, Adam: *Introverts in Church*, pg. 33

² Cain, Susan. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, pg. 10-11.

the extroverts and the introverts in mind. Does this service encourage a lot of standing, clapping, and applauding? Are there spaces for silence? To be quiet and still - that doesn't require extroverted energy? Is the space too overstimulating? Have we paid attention to the fact that some people are neurologically diverse; which could include having a fragrance-free zone; being aware of the role of bright lights and loud sounds in the service? Do we give the introverts among us permission not to stand, not to clap, not to sing, but to simply be in and with the service in whatever way they are comfortable? Do we have space for the extroverts to feel welcomed and supported? That they can laugh, or clap or shout out loud if they wish without being shushed or met with the arched eyebrows of disapproval? With a new building renovation in mind, can we create spaces for both the glad-handing extrovert during coffee hour, and the introverts who would be happier with a comfortable chair, a cup of coffee and one or two people at most? How do we create this grand experiment that we call Beloved Community so that all of us can bring all of ourselves to this time and this place and feel supported and appreciated?

This is not just for the adults of course. Cain devotes an entire chapter to the challenges of raising introverted children in, as she says - a world that can't stop talking. I recently started watching the ½ hour Mr. Roger's TV show while running on the treadmill - a bit of a dichotomy. What struck me was how slow the show is. How painfully slow Mr. Rogers talks. How naïve the sets seem to be - not even painted with bright colors, no sound effects, no flashing lights or big noises. It's boring. And I loved it. I flipped over next to the children's cartoon network and got something entirely different. Bright primary colors, high-pitches voices, loud sound effects, a lot of action and activity. For the extroverted child, this is stimulating and exciting. But not all children are extroverted. If you are a parent who is actively raising an introverted child, that child is more prone to projections of an extroverted world. Your child is more likely to be viewed as slow, or shy or socially awkward. They aren't called upon in school; they get stomach aches when they must work collaboratively with others; they feel ill when there is a school rally. There can be several reasons for this of course, but Cain suggests that our current

educational environment is not created for introverted children. We encourage groupthink and expect children to perform their best while working with others. But some kids work, think and play best alone; and express their needs for companionship in their own way. We applaud children when they come forward for the Wonder box for their boldness; but what about the children who never will come forward? Is there another way which we can affirm children's diversity without applauding them? Can we acknowledge that some children are introverts who, like some of us, would be mortified to stand in front of 130 people on a Sunday morning, but, when left to their devices might draw a map of their inner life at the back of the room? Or they might compose a poem that brings you to tears? How to do we make space for all kinds of expressions of the Spirit?

When I realized that I was an introvert in what appears to be a highly-extroverted profession, a lot of the struggles I was having became more clear. One on ones were better than small groups; and small groups were better than large ones. Cocktail parties and coffee hour were harder than I wanted them to be. Speaking to a large group was less overstimulating than sitting around and sharing in a small one. I realized too, that - ironically - most ministers are introverts!! Because we are drawn to ministry through our interest in a life of reflection and study, most of us are intensely interested in this ephemeral essence of our human nature - our soul. The soul is inherently shy because it grows in darkness and silence; not in the bright light of the sun. The soul wants to swim beyond the comfort of a warm beach and strike out into deeper waters, where it's clear and clean; vast and quiet. It is in the silence where great things fashion themselves; where ideas for novels and plays and musical scores are born. It is where the heart opens to mysteries of love and pain; it is where we can hear our own voice amidst the babble of so many others. It's just like Mr. Rogers, whose slow speech and extremely long and winding skits allow space for the soul to discover itself - and to tell us - what it needs.

When you think about it, creating a church like this one seems like an impossible undertaking. We acknowledge the diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs, from the God-centered Christian to the Fact-Based Atheist and so much that lies in

between; we come from a variety of class backgrounds and social locations; our gender and affectional orientation; our race and ethnicity all are important identities which we bring to this one place and one time. We bring our religious background with us; our memories of robust and exuberant worship services or experiences of worshipping in a cathedral or traditional church with somber hymns and quiet prayers. Our expectations or hopes for the worship experience have been shaped by a Zen sesshin or a Synagogue. Each Sunday our congregation has a mix of those who prefer introverted silence or extroverted engagement. In all that we do, we should create a place for both – the exuberant extrovert and the quiet ones – the ones who won't stand up and talk during Joys and Concerns or be the first to speak at a congregational meeting; the ones who won't clap during a hymn – and the ones who dart out right after the service.

There is something else, however, in our worship that goes beyond remembering and acknowledging both those among us who are introverts, and those among us who are extroverts. There is something inherent in a worship service that I think both kinds of people have come here to find – and that is a space where you can listen for the Quiet One inside; that voice that speaks to us not in the rain, or the wind, or the party, but that is the still, small, voice within.

Sometimes in a worship service that is a voice of insight about something you didn't know before and the voice says "Aha!". Sometimes it is a voice of conscience that points to a situation in the world or your own behavior that is causing harm, and the voice says "Look!".

Sometimes it is a voice of confirmation, that reminds you that you are not alone is what you feel, believe or think, that this is a community where you really feel at home, and the voice says "Yes!"

The introverts here today might be more familiar with that voice, but we all have it. Take some time to get to know that voice inside of you. Imagine it to be a revered guest in your inner, soulful life. Listen to what it tells you. Then, consider these words, attributed to the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. – a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!... Be grateful for whatever comes. because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."