

“Everyone Is Needed” by Ember Kelley

Blurb:

What are the unstated things that we believe about community and leadership, and how do these ideas shape our communities? Join us for an exploration of a shift in narratives- towards shared ministry and reflecting on the power of creating community together. Presented by Ember Kelley, UUA Youth and Emerging Adult Ministry Staff.

Hymn Ideas:

18 What Wondrous Love
349 We Gather Together
209 O come, You Longing Thirsty Souls

Readings:

Primary Reading:

“Do you already know that your existence--who and how you are--is in and of itself a contribution to the people and place around you? Not after or because you do some particular thing, but simply the miracle of your life. And that the people around you, and the place(s), have contributions as well? Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?

Are you actively practicing generosity and vulnerability in order to make the connections between you and others clear, open, available, durable? Generosity here means giving of what you have without strings or expectations attached. Vulnerability means showing your needs.”

—Adrienne Maree Brown, From Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds

Opening:

We come to religious community from many paths and with diverse needs:

If you have come here seeking comfort, may your pain be soothed.

If you have come here looking for answers, may you find new questions.

If you have come here seeking purpose, may your call be awakened.

If you have come here hoping to build a new way, may the path open before you.

[Words By Michelle LaGrave](#)

Closing:

Love holds you.

Love bears witness to all your inherent dignity and worthiness.

It witnesses how you try, succeed, and fail—and it does not flinch.

Love will not let go.

Love holds all of you.

[By Carrie Holley-Hurt](#)

Discussion Question:

When was a time you felt a sense of belonging in your community?

----- **Sermon** -----

My name is Ember Kelley and I use any pronouns. I am a member of the Youth and Emerging Adult Ministry Staff Team, part of the Lifespan Faith Engagement Office at the Unitarian Universalist Association. I practice visual descriptions as an act of inclusive welcoming- I am a white gender expansive person, I have shoulder length hair that appears blonde on screen but is greying brown hair, I wear glasses, and I'm wearing a grey button up shirt. Behind me are windows and bookshelves. I'm honored to be sharing with you today.

In elementary school, I made a statement that would end up shaping the course of my entire life. When asked about what I wanted to be when I grew up, I dared to name "Pastor" as a potential option. Other options were on my list, including such glamorous work as Paleontologist and Painter- apparently I was destined for a career with P in the name- but everyone around me picked up on the idea that someday I would be a Pastor.

I was a young evangelical Christian, so once those words had left my mouth, ministers and other adults became a constant source of praise and encouragement toward considering a "call on my life from God". I had not turned ten, but suddenly was being told that destiny had put me on a path toward a certain job. And who was I to consider fighting destiny?

I became trapped in a narrative placed on my life- the skills I was showing at a young age, and my interest in religion meant that I absolutely must head down a certain path.

To be invested in my religious community on a deep level- that meant that a singular path to pursue ministry. The narrative was that I was either a passive consumer of religion, or on track to become the ordained minister- who was responsible for all the facets of keeping the community running.

There was no room for variation for other ideas of what type of work- even religious based work- that my skills could lead to- because the vision of a Senior Minister was the highest calling- this was the goal for anyone with a sense of call to do religious work. This was the narrative that was provided to me, and that trapped me.

I internalized the narrative as well, and even when I began confronting my gender non conformity in my 20s, the narrative was so powerful that I became more convinced that I must become a minister so I could prove to those who had issues with my identity- prove to them that my ordination would be proof trans people were able to belong in religious spaces. I couldn't even think to question the narrative I had been fed since I was a child.

What other goal could there be than ordination?

If I was truly committed to the exploration of spirituality in my life, wasn't this the path I had to go down to prove that I was serious about it? To prove that I was able to meet all the expectations of a religious leader- to offer all of my life to this work?

It took a lot of painful religious experiences , followed by intentionally stepping back from religious spaces, for me to even consider that the same abilities and desires could be expressed in other ways- or that religious communities could have a different form than the hierarchy I had grown up with.

I headed to non Christian dominant cultures, and purely educational work, where I began to realize that there were so many more ways to find meaning in life. And where I began to do the work of building a community of meaningful friendships.

And then it was finally in finding religious education work in the Unitarian Universalist Association that I was able to step back and say - “Wait, there are other narratives for what leadership is and what our religious communities can look like!”.

We have so often ended up stuck in our own narratives around what our communities must be , or must become, especially when it comes to leadership. We’ve brought along many of our cultural assumptions around leadership: what it means to be a leader, what it requires, and who can be leaders.

These narratives lead us to believe that we have to cultivate leaders from an early age, or identify people with special skills, who we then put our hope into the belief that they will become future Unitarian Universalist ministers.

These same narratives cause us to view potential new members as future volunteers. We place many expectations about what roles people will be able to fill in our communities.

And many of these narratives from our expectations of leadership lead to unhealthy dynamics in our communities.

The upheaval of many systems in recent years brings the possibility for beginning to change these narratives. We can honor what has come before, but I believe we can shift to new visions in our congregations about what leadership looks like, and what our congregations can be.

What story can we tell instead? I believe that shared ministry and visions of collaborative community building provide us with the key.

We have seen new ideas around leadership emerge in Unitarian Universalism, especially around the concept of “Shared Ministry”. Shared ministry means many things— from recognizing the role of religious education and religious educators in

communities, to thinking about staff teams that work together in dynamic and flexible ways, and then also to recognizing our interconnected congregational life

Dr. Janice Marie Johnson, offers us this definition: "Shared ministry means sharing in the responsibilities of the community." —

We all are doing ministry together. When our congregations come together in service, when we gather in education, when we gather for community building events, when we do justice work, when we care for each other- all of us are doing this ministry together.

Healthy communities need everyone, not just superstar leaders. We build community together.

In the book Emergent Strategy, author adrienne maree brown writes that "No one is special, and everyone is needed." - I find this quote both beautiful and immensely challenging- What could it look like for us to internalize this feeling in our congregations? Can we live out the reality that everyone is needed? How can we focus on building up our entire communities instead of solitary leaders?

Can we change the narrative around leadership and work to build communities of sustainable connections, where people can develop a variety of capabilities, explore their sense of self and their sense of belonging, and try on roles without necessarily making a lifetime commitment, either to our faith movement or to who they want to be within it?

And I think this carries over to our work across generational differences as well- in collaborative communal leadership, we can build a sense of partnership between our youngest members and our oldest members. We can build communal partnership based on the understanding that the work of community building and the experience of belonging are what are most needed- that we need to provide space where all can be nourished and grow.

Instead of pressuring individuals to carry the weight of leadership alone- can we foster communities where we feel a deep sense of belonging which then calls forth a desire to build community together? Involvement in community building is the leadership we need. Let us grow alongside each other because our shared community means something deeply to each of us.

I think of the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who taught about community amidst Nazism in Germany- he wrote that “The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.”

We can come to our communities with all of our training, all of our expectation, all of our preconceived notions for what we should be doing or how we should be doing it- those dreams of community- but as Bonhoeffer is sharing- those dreams of community are not a replacement for the work of love- the work of connecting with other people in community.

Are we coming to communities with narratives of what they should be and what they owe us? Can we shift to instead seeing our communities as a space to encounter differences in beautiful ways?

Community is both challenging and beautiful, because a community will always be a group of people with different ideas, different ways of doing things, different approaches, and different interests. Our UU Value of pluralism found in Article 2 tells us that “We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.”

If “No one is special, and everyone is needed.” , then we must embrace this pluralism and all that it offers us. We can see our differences, and yet commit more to love those around us and create community. This is the beauty of pluralism grounded in love.

Building community isn't the work of a leader who will save us all.

Building community isn't asking volunteers to give all of their energy until they burnout.

Building community isn't making your congregation fit into the mold of another congregation that seems to be successful.

Building community is showing up for one another, in our differences, finding beauty and possibility- together. And navigating together in collaborative community and shared ministry to create a space where people feel a sense of belonging.

While it took a long journey, I am glad that I was shaken away from this idea that I was either a passive consumer of religion or had to fit a certain vision of leadership. I realized that a sense of belonging, a sense of buy in, is available to all of us.

We can approach our Unitarian Universalist communities - and we can grow and work together. We can become hubs of belonging, not predicated on what skills are offered, not predicated on who we are, but solely on a desire to be a part of a community together.

And we must do this, because everyone is needed.