

## Magic Moments in Communities

September 22, 2013: Annabel Grote

For several years, as I walked into Hale Lounge, often going to yoga class or a meeting, I have been annoyed at seeing the liriopie unattended, year after year. If you don't know liriopie, it is that lovely green perennial which surrounds the large tree well. I am no great gardener, but my mother taught me that this plant must be pruned every year around the end of March, before the new growth takes over and mingles with the old growth. So, for several years, I was irritated as I walked by, thinking, "This liriopie needs to be pruned." Finally, it dawned on me that I just better do this job myself. So, last spring, I began the job. I put my pruning shears, garden gloves, and a yard waste bag in the trunk of the car and left it there until I had finished the job. The reality for me is that my hands and my body get sore if I kneel and prune, stretching forward, for more than about 20 minutes, so I had to stretch this job over several visits to the church and included pruning in the central flower garden as well. As I was completing the job one Sunday morning before church, Mark Piechota joined me in an interesting conversation and helped me take the yard waste to the car. Others noticed that I was pruning and called out greetings to me. Now I have the pleasure of seeing the liriopie full of new growth, looking beautiful and the joy of knowing that I took initiative to do a small job that perhaps no one else identified as a priority, but I did.

I have volunteered and given of my energy and talents since I joined the church in 2005- why did this seem like a magical moment to me? I think it was because I saw a unique need and just felt the joy of making some change that was visible and meaningful to me. I did it with happiness and have enjoyed seeing the liriopie thrive.

Of course there are many people in our community who see what needs to be done and just do it – that is the way of community. But this was a magic moment of commitment to and taking responsibility for this community for me. And learning a lesson that most of us learn or experience in our families, or at work, or with friends: if we see something that needs to be done, we just do it, or get help, or encourage others to be involved.

I have a memory from quite a few years ago, perhaps before I joined the church, when I was attending social events and services occasionally as a spouse of a long-time member. One time I complained to one of the social hour organizers during a social event that there was never any water or seltzer available – did people in this church only drink soda and wine? She was polite to me at the time, but I have wondered if she just squelched annoyance at my comment which certainly seemed to indicate that I thought I should be served by others. Eventually I began to bring water or seltzer for the whole community occasionally and that is what I now do. This small incident indicates my own transformation into a giver, someone who buys into the needs

of community and helps as possible or as needed. Many of us have experienced a similar transformation either in this church or other communities to which we belong.

It appears to me that we have come a long way in the past few years, notably since we got such fine professional leadership from our minister, Reverend Kathy Ellis. The spirit of joy and cooperation, of mutual working together toward common goals has increased. Our hospitality teams now take the tasks of each Sunday into a group effort where all have the opportunity to serve, as they are able, in mutual goals. We have a covenant which guides our behavior, reminding us always of ways to handle conflict and abide in friendship.

Many of us are familiar with a book called *The Road Less Traveled*, by M. Scott Peck, published in 1978. Peck is also known as a scholar and community activist. In his book *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, Peck considers the most salient characteristics of a true community. I would like to quote Peck and then comment on his theory:

- 1. *Inclusivity, commitment and consensus:*** *Members accept and embrace each other, celebrating their individuality and transcending their differences. They commit themselves to the effort and the people involved. They make decisions and reconcile their differences through consensus.*

Striving and practicing inclusivity is one of the hallmarks of Unitarian Universalism. Look around you – you will see diversity here and you will feel the way we are resolving our differences.

- 2. *Realism:*** *Members bring together multiple perspectives to better understand the whole context of the situation.*

We do not always agree about religious, social or social justice issues – no!!! But we realistically try to understand and respect each other's beliefs and enter into conversations.

- 3. *Contemplation:*** *Members examine themselves. They are individually and collectively self-aware of the world outside themselves, the world inside themselves, and the relationship between the two.*

Liberal religion is all about contemplation of the self and the world. We practice liberal religion and community here.

- 4. *A safe place:*** *Members allow others to share their vulnerability, heal themselves, and express who they truly are.*

**Do you feel safe here?** I hope you do. I pray that you all feel acceptance when you share your joys and sorrows, when you sing your songs or lead worship. I used to be nervous about such things, but I have learned to trust this very forgiving community. I never dreamed that I would feel confident to actually give the Words of Inspiration, but I decided that my thoughts and

experiences are just as valuable as anyone else's, trained or untrained, and that I could trust the love of this community to take this leap. In addition, our fine professional leadership models good worship practice each week, giving us a sacred container in which to express ourselves in any way desired.

- 5. A laboratory for personal disarmament:** *Members experientially discover the rules for peacemaking and embrace its virtues. They feel and express compassion and respect for each other as fellow human beings.*

Are your divergent views respected? I think so. Some of us, like Sandy and I, have widely divergent belief systems – for example, we won't even enter a conversation about vibrational medicine – but we have deep respect and love for each other and have enjoyed creating this service together, using our varied skill sets. I know there are other friendships like this in the church.

- 6. A group that can fight gracefully:** *Members resolve conflicts with wisdom and grace. They listen and understand, respect each other's gifts, accept each other's limitations, celebrate their differences, bind each other's wounds, and commit to a struggle together rather than against each other.*

Now that we are happy in worship together, I note that there is much less conflict. Now that we have open ears to hear our complaints, I see many of them dissolving easily.

- 7. A group of all leaders:** *Members harness the "flow of leadership" to make decisions and set a course of action. It is the spirit of community itself that leads and not any single individual.*

Many of us are leaders here – in singing and music-making, in creating the Religious Education program, in doing the work of finance, building and grounds, AV. I might remind you there is always space for different leaders and more workers.

- 8. A spirit:** *The true spirit of community is the spirit of peace, love, wisdom and power. Members may view the source of this spirit as an outgrowth of the collective self or as the manifestation of a Higher Will.*

We may not all agree on the name of any higher power or even if one exists. No one is telling us what we must think here, or expecting that we are perfect or that any of this exists without struggle, but certainly we are creating a nourishing spiritual community together.

Music making is central to our community and happens to be a particular love of mine, as most of you know.

Being a musician requires hours and hours of sometimes tedious, concentrated focused work. Why do we do it? We do it so we have a chance to dance inside the music, so that when we

perform we are in a space of joy, of intense concentration where there is no more thinking or trying, just being within beauty, hearing and feeling the swell and expressiveness and beauty of each part and of the whole. While performing we are energetically entrained in focus with 10 or 80 or 90 other people.

An article from the Health and Science section of *The Week* magazine, July 22, 2013 expands upon this type of personal experience, and I quote:

“As choir members harmonize, their breathing and heartbeats synchronize in time with the music – creating a rewarding feeling of oneness. That’s the conclusion of a new study by Swedish researchers, who strapped heart-rate monitors on 15 young choral singers. The singers were asked to perform three exercises: humming, singing a popular national anthem and chanting a mantra. Researchers found that the pulses of the singers increased and decreased together as the music’s tempo changes. When the songs required the singers to breathe in unison, their heartbeats were especially aligned. The controlled breathing that singing demands also seems to have a calming influence on singers.”

The lungs and the heart communicate with the brain via the vagus nerve, which also helps regulate emotion. This link could explain why group singing strengthens solidarity, not just in choirs but among football fans and work crews. “When you are singing together, you are synchronizing with other people, and harmonizing with your hearts.”

We do a lot of singing here, in this community. We truly are harmonizing our hearts in all our worship practices, working and playing together.

There is magic here, the magic of commitment, of *going the extra mile* of helping one another, of praying and sharing our sorrows and difficulties.

May we continue to thrive within this deep sense of community, taking responsibility together for it, and may we move our magic out into the world.

Blessed be.