

**The Meaning of Membership**  
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Years ago, I met with a committee charged with screening people who aspired to become Unitarian Universalist ministers. The committee's role was to assign to us a red light, a yellow light, or a green light in our journey toward ministry. I kid you not, one of their questions to me was, "If you could be any bird, which bird would you be, and why?" I am lucky that I did not get the "red light" right then and there, because this is what I said: "I would be the belted kingfisher because it's short and stocky, and its crest gives it some personality. I like it because it dives for fish from a height and does not have to walk around in the mud like those wading birds." Almost immediately, I thought, "Uh oh. I am in trouble. Ministry probably involves a lot of walking around in the mud." Luckily for me, my kingfisher answer was not a red-light offense.

I should have said this: I should have said that if I could be any bird, it would be a pelican because they know how to fish cooperatively. In the slough near where I lived in Santa Cruz County, I observed this pelican behavior. Half a dozen or more white pelicans assembled in a circle on the water in the slough, facing inward. The pelicans moved together in a loose circle as they fished, their bills submerged and moving from side to side. Any fish making a mad dash to escape one gaping pelican bill found itself swimming into the bill of the pelican on the opposite side of the circle. So it is with human beings. We are social animals. We need to know how to feed cooperatively or we risk going hungry.

Perhaps you have heard the story about what it is like in heaven and in hell. Heaven and hell are strangely alike. There is a pot of the most delicious soup in heaven, a soup that smells so good that it makes your mouth water. Amazingly enough, there is a pot of that same delicious soup in hell, a soup that smells so good that it makes your mouth water. In heaven, everyone sits around the table holding a very long spoon, and everyone eats. In hell, everyone sits around the table holding the identical very long spoon, and everyone is starving. What is the difference between heaven and hell? In both places, the spoons are so long that it is not possible for a person to dip

the spoon into the soup and bring the spoon to his or her lips. In heaven, the people feed each other, for each spoon comfortably reaches the lips of someone else at the table. In hell, the people are starving because they cannot bring the spoon to their own lips, and they can only imagine feeding themselves.

We feed cooperatively or we risk going hungry. This is not to say that we should become codependent, taking care of everyone else's business while neglecting our own. (Many things are true at once. May wisdom and compassion guide our focus from moment to moment.) How do we feed each other in Unitarian Universalist congregations? There is a clue in the latest issue of TIME magazine, the issue that has a photograph of a California firefighter on the cover.<sup>1</sup> In it, there is the second of four advertisements that the Unitarian Universalist Association will place in the magazine before the end of the year. "Find us and ye shall seek," reads the ad. "If you're searching for a spiritual home where questions are as welcome as answers, find us. We are a loving, open-minded religious community that is guided not by a set creed or dogma but by a free and responsible quest for truth and meaning in our lives. There is a religion that welcomes your search. Discover Unitarian Universalism. Nurture your spirit. Help heal our world."

We feed cooperatively by supporting each other's free and responsible quest for truth and meaning. According to a report entitled *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership* (which is the report of a blue-ribbon panel called the "Commission on Appraisal"), membership is a process, and it is not smooth or entirely predictable. "Though there are organizational and institutional needs to define membership cleanly and precisely, the process of membership is in reality a gradual progression from lesser to greater commitment which neither begins nor ends at the point of joining . . ." What is more, according to the report, "Community is a happy-sounding word, and it is common for religious liberals to emphasize the ideal of a community as a primary reason and purpose for the institution of the church. Such idealism has its place, but building an authentic human community is never easy and only fleetingly happy . . . Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> It is the TIME magazine issue dated November 5, 2007.

Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a ‘spiritual community’ but want nothing to do with ‘organized religion.’ By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make demands upon them to support the institution’s needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other, and part of the church’s job is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive, giving not only our money but ourselves. In other words, only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community.”<sup>2</sup>

Unitarian Universalists are united by commitments, not by beliefs. We feed cooperatively by supporting each other’s free and responsible quest for truth and meaning. Paradoxically, in supporting each other’s quest, we may just find some answers of our own (we may just find fish swimming toward us). Returning for a moment to the November 5 issue of TIME magazine, notice that there is an out-and-out advertisement on the left side of these pages. Notice also that on the right side of these pages is a “special advertising feature” or “advertorial.” The ad on the left side reads “Find us and ye shall seek.” The “advertorial” on the right side reads “Seek and you shall find. Religion is one of the most provocative topics in American society today. We invite you to view a special collection of TIME articles on religion and spirituality at [time.com/ReligionPages](http://time.com/ReligionPages) – and explore the relationship between religion and a range of topics including science, sexuality, and American democracy.” Unitarian Universalists funded both the advertisement and the “advertorial.”

If we bring nothing else to congregational life, let us bring a willingness to change. In the words of Unitarian Universalist George K. Beach, “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted.”<sup>3</sup> In the past month, this congregation has been reconstituted by the deaths of two treasured members, and this congregation is reconstituted by the five new members whose presence we celebrate this morning. Membership in this congregation is not a “numbers game.” It is a process of deepening commitment. Membership in Monte Vista

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<sup>2</sup>Belonging: The Meaning of Membership by the Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment* by James Luther Adams, edited by George K. Beach, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991 p. 13.

Unitarian Universalist Congregation brings the promise of articulating commitments more clearly, living those commitments more fully, and practicing resilience – the ability to bounce back and thrive, no matter what life throws our way. May we become ever more adept at feeding cooperatively. May it be so!