

“Between Everyone & Nobody”

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9 September 2007

Suddenly it's important to know names—
 The name of the waitress in the donut shop
 The name of the clerk in the bookstore
 The name of the teller at the bank
 The name of the visitor in the elevator
 The name of the guard at the door
 The name of the janitor on the top floor
 The names of all the old men
 Shuffling backgammon pieces
 In the park across the street
 The names of all the office workers
 Jostling in lines by the food carts
 Even the name of the park and the name
 Of the statue in the park covered in ash.

- “Names” by Rachel Vigier from *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*

In two days the nation will mark the sixth anniversary of the most devastating terrorist attacks on American soil in our recent history if not in generations. The images of that warm and sunny day have become irrevocably marked on many of our memories. Our children will grow up hearing about it, having it be a part of the collective consciousness of our country, relating to the world through a lens of vulnerability, and determine where and how they travel based on the subsequent military actions and war that have already found their place in our history books. Life changed that day, maybe not permanently for everyone, but nobody was left unaffected. Our world got smaller that day. What seemed so far away from us, the violence and fear, the danger and the insecurity of war-torn countries, came home to us.

For a time afterward, when the shock hadn't quite worn off and many began to reflect on what such an event could mean for them, some found a deeper sense of what was important to them. People changed careers, re-evaluated the course of their lives and some decided that now was the time to make a difference. And suddenly it became “important to know names,” as

Vigier writes. It began to matter who was around us, it became important to know and to be known.

“We have seen the Earth from the moon,” writes Rev. Tom Schade, “and the most important word in our economic lexicon these days is ‘globalization.’ We have seen that humanity is one species. You can now send off a sample of your DNA, just rub a swab against the lining of your cheek, and you will get back in the mail, a report that shows where you fit into the human family tree. And what the results show is that we are all ‘mutts and mongrels,’ that nobody is racially or ethnically pure. We are not only each others neighbors, we are each others’ relatives. The phrase, ‘the human family’ is not just high-minded blabber.”

But even in the midst of understanding ourselves as part of the global community, the human family is too large for us to feel a true and intimate sense of belonging. There are thousands of people right here in Brookfield, which is considered a small, rural town; too many to know. There are hundreds of thousands of Unitarian Universalists across the world. Even with the same label of faith and religion, there are too many to know. In the rapidly shrinking world, where we can know within minutes what has happened literally on the other side of the globe, our struggle is to find the place between everyone and nobody.

“By our own togetherness,” writes Rev. Edwin Buehrer, “in the growing community of our... life, our nation, and our world, we have brought about a situation in which we must each redefine our own importance in the midst of millions whose lives touch ours and who have their own claim to self-importance. For better or worse, if we are to be individuals, we must practice the art within the thickly crowded community. There is no escaping, no returning.

“And this means, of course, that you cannot turn back from the world community, no matter how distasteful, to find refuge in tribalism or nationalism. Such a return would be a reckless defiance of our earthly life and our human history...”

It is an elusive space to find. That place where we do not need to know everyone, but are not so isolated as to know nobody; that balance between being overly involved and being disconnected. We human beings are social beings, we long to relate to others, see what we have in common and to be accepted for the unique person we are; with all our imperfections and talents.

Religious communities can provide such an opportunity. We are the between of everyone and nobody. We provide a place for each of us to be known by and to be connected to others. It is our mission here to know the names of those with whom we worship and serve our congregation. The expectation of each of us is that we live in the awareness of our interconnectedness; that we practice here, with one another, the delicate balance of living among those different than us as well as alongside, those with whom we share the same values and beliefs. It is with one another that we prepare ourselves for the global connections, for the world getting smaller. Within this congregation, each of us can find a place in which there are not too many names, not so many people that we are left in a crowded room.

In order for this religious community to be the in-between of nobodys and everyones, each of us must participate and venture forth into being known. It is our task to strike the balance. We begin this each autumn with the collecting together of the stones that we have brought with us or that we have taken from the entryway. Every year we mark our willingness to take some risks, to open ourselves to new things, to seek religious truth with companions who may just become friends. We collect these stones, which like every one of us, are unique and bring something of

beauty and strength and presence. This collection then sits in our parlor as witness to our gathering, to our being, to our belonging. These stones, small though they may be, are the representatives of our being between nobody and everyone.