It Takes a Village

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington
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In April, my colleague, the Reverend Michael Leuchtenberger, gave a sermon at the collegial gathering of the Northern New England chapter of the UU Ministers Association. Michael is the minister at the UU in Concord, NH. He is also someone our First UU Board worked with this past summer on deepening our governance capacity.

His sermon resonated strongly with nearly every colleague at that gathering. Generously, Michael offered that any colleague who wished to do so, could borrow the sermon whole, or in part, or as inspiration. So I give credit to Michael for the concept behind this sermon, in particular, his insightful way of describing different roles you will hear about. There are some phrases in here - even a handful of full sentences that are his. And I have danced with his sermon since April and offer you this version, adapted for us, this fall of 2026.

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It starts with an invitation to imagine our congregation not as a house of worship full of people but as a village. A village, that if it is alive and well, is not just a conglomeration of individuals, human silos, but a network of mutual care. It is a place where people are known and knowing, held and holding, challenged and challenging, co-created and co-creative, and changed and changing - all in relationship.

If it is a village that is alive and well, one that is thriving, one that is messy (because all life is messy, isn't it?), then like other similar villages, there are a plethora of different roles. Each role has a gift. Each role comes with a shadow. Here are some of these roles:

Welcomers. People of the village who instinctively move toward the stranger, the visitor, the unfamiliar face. They learn the new names before anyone else does. They remember to introduce people to each other. Without them, our stated value of welcome remains abstract — a banner on the wall, mere lip service.

The welcomers' *gift* is hospitality.

Their *shadow* can be the tendency to welcome people into the community as it is rather than making room for who the community might become.

Keepers of Memory. Folx in the village who carry versions of the community's origin story — who remember why things were built the way they were, what was tried and failed, what was hard-won. In a congregation, these are the longtime members who hold institutional memory: ideally as witnesses to the arc of a community's becoming, rather than as gatekeepers. They can answer the important question: how did we get here?

Their *gift* is continuity.

Their *shadow* side can be nostalgia that resists necessary change or the belief that their recollection is infallible.

Elders. Not defined merely by longevity, elders are people of all ages whose accumulated experience has been tempered into wisdom — people who've suffered, reflected, and arrived at something useful. Regardless of age, they've learned how to hold complexity without needing to resolve it prematurely. In a village, elders are consulted before major decisions, but are not given veto power. They hold the long view when everyone else is reacting to the immediate crisis.

Their *gift* is perspective.

Their *shadow* can be the assumption that their experience is universal.

Healers. Every village needs people skilled in tending to wounds — physical, emotional, relational, spiritual. In a congregation, healers show up in formal roles (like pastoral visitors or part of the Care Network delivering shawls or meals; or even [point to self] the minister) and informal roles: the person who always seems to know who is struggling, the one who brings food without being asked, the quiet presence listening with minimal judgment). Healers hold the grief, confusion, and crisis that community life inevitably generates.

Their *gift* is attentiveness.

Their *shadow* can be the risk of absorbing so much pain that they neglect their own.

Then there are the **Prophets**, the people of the village who see the gap between what a community claims and what it does — and who refuse to let that gap go unnamed. In a village, they are the ones who stand up in the town meeting and say the uncomfortable thing. They are rarely the most popular figures. But without them, communities drift into comfortable self-congratulation.

In a congregation like ours, or an Association like the Unitarian Universalist, the prophetic voice might come from a longtime social justice activist, or from a young person who hasn't yet learned to soften their truth-telling. At times it comes from the minister, settled or guest preaching.

Their *gift* is moral clarity.

Their *shadow* can be self-righteousness — the prophet who mistakes volume for wisdom.

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So far, I have named Welcomers, Keepers of Memory, Elders, Healers, and Prophets. And there are more.

Bridge-Builders. Every village contains groupings that can lean into factions — people who don't naturally understand each other, who move in different circles, who might not choose each other if left to their own tendencies. Yet, bridge-builders are those who move comfortably between these groups. They translate. They find common ground. They bring people into relationship who wouldn't have found each other otherwise. In a congregation navigating theological diversity, generational difference, or conflict, bridge-builders are essential.

Their *gift* is connection across difference.

Their *shadow* can be the tendency to smooth over real disagreement rather than allowing it to be productive.

There are the **Storytellers**, keeping the community's narrative alive, making meaning, and framing experience in ways that help a community understand itself as the world changes, as our community context reinvents itself.

The Storytellers *gift* is meaning-making and inspiration.

Their *shadow* can be the tendency to tell the story that flatters the community rather than the one that challenges it. Or they can start believing that they are the only holders of truth.

We have the **Sustainers**, the village people who show up to fix what is broken (or remove the rust from the iron fence like John Davis did all summer), who manage the pledge campaign, who organize the Bazaar, who crank the clock once it's working again (which is soon, I hear). They are chairs of teams and task forces, the folks behind the scenes spiffy up this sanctuary or plant flowers at the side entrance.

Their *gift* is faithfulness to often unglamorous work.

Their *shadow* can be resentment, when their labor goes unacknowledged.

There are **Boundary-Holders** - villagers who understand and maintain its edges — not to exclude, but to define. These people remind us of our covenant. They name when behavior has crossed a line. They help us understand that welcome and boundarylessness are not the same thing. In a village, they are the ones who know the difference between a disagreement and a violation, between discomfort and harm.

Their *gift* is the protection of communal integrity.

Their *shadow* can be rigidity — the tendency to enforce rules in ways that drive out the very people who most need a place to belong.

There are the **Dreamers and Innovators**. These folx imagine what could be. They pull, prod, prompt, and sometimes drag, the community toward a future it can't quite see yet. Without dreamers, communities calcify. In a congregation, innovators are often in tension with the keepers of memory — and that tension, held well, is generative.

Their *gift* is imagination.

Their *shadow* can be impatience with the slow, relational work that actually makes change sustainable.

And **Children**. In a real village, children are not a program. They are full members of the community whose presence changes the nature of the village itself. A congregation that treats children as recipients of community rather than makers of it has misunderstood what a village is.

Their *gift* is presence without pretense.

Their *shadow* — if you can call it that — is that they reveal exactly how much patience and long-term thinking the adults around them actually have.

There are, no doubt, other roles in congregational villages. But it seems wise to call this sufficient for now. I have named these roles:

Welcomers

Keepers of Memory

Elders

Healers

Prophets

Bridge Builders

Sustainers

Boundary-Holders

Dreamers & Innovators

Children

In such a village, with so many roles, ministers are neither central nor peripheral. Your Senior Minister, and all the religious professionals serving First UU, and to some degree, the whole staff, are tenders of the relational terrain (always in partnership with you all). Part of our role is to notice the currents and help us navigate them:

- where trust is growing,
- where it has frayed,
- where voices are missing,
- where connection is waiting to be deepened.
- to tend to our collective relational longing.

We help create the conditions where:

- people take responsibility for one another,
- care is shared rather than centralized,
- and belonging is practiced, not just proclaimed.

Perhaps this is part of our shared calling, be we lay people or staff or religious professionals:

To help our congregation be a village where care is shared, voices are honored, and love is practiced in real ways — a living, breathing community that holds us even as we help hold it.

When I reflect upon my role, as minister in a village ~ in THIS village ~ I see that it is not my responsibility to keep the village healthy, but to keep reminding the village ~ to keep reminding you ~ of its own capacity to love, to lean into health as a whole, to be the alive and robust village that is our potential.

Reflection upon Sermon (otherwise known as Part II)

Again, my deep gratitude to my colleague, Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger, for his insight and emotional intelligence in identifying all those roles in congregational villages. And for his generosity in sharing his sermon that its wisdom might go wide.

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If you were to look at the top of the order of service, published on our website, or if you caught the lovely graphic at the start of the service, you will have read this statement from Priya Parker:

> *Everyone wants a village. But no one knows how to be a villager.*

I encountered it while listening to a podcast that I want to recommend to you. It was an episode of “We Can Do Hard Things,” and the guest was Priya Parker, author of the much acclaimed, The Art of Gathering, has written a new book, published earlier this month, called The Art of Fighting. It has the subtitle: “the transforming power of conflict.”

I feel like the whole nation - maybe the whole world - should have this as required reading.

The transforming power of conflict. This is what we are working on. Yes, here in this congregation. Yes, applied here. But the stuff we are learning - how to listen with

curiosity, not needing to change our mind, but being willing to invest in our relationships with each other - that's stuff we can use in all aspects of our lives. Anyone getting together with family over the upcoming winter holidays?

Here are two key pieces of wisdom from Priya Parker's book that I want to raise up because they are more than just a little mind blowing - even if we have heard them before, even if we know them intellectually:

"Friction is formative"

"Fighting is not the death of community. It is its lifeblood."

I think I have told this story before from this pulpit. So forgive me if this is redundant. When I meet with people who are seeking to become members of the Society, one of the things I try to remember to say is a concept that I learned from Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber, a Lutheran pastor. I warn them that not only will I disappoint them as a minister, but this place will. Before signing the book, they've got to be willing to stick around not only for that disappointment to work itself out, or for whatever conflict may arise, but for what happens on the other side.

Because it's the stuff on the other side that make it worthwhile. The deepened relationships, the flourishing that comes from having gone through a hard thing together, the new learning that influences who we will be into the future. That is what I think Priya Parker means when she says that "friction is formative." That is what she means when she writes "Fighting is not the death of community. It is its lifeblood."

We are all learning to be this village's villagers. This is true if we just started attending recently, or if we have been here since the 1970s. Doing our best, to not only place love at the center, but to lead with love.

So be it. See to it. Amen.