

**“Becoming, Belonging, Being in Community”**  
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In 2001, the Unitarian Universalist Association published a report entitled “Belonging”. And it begins with these words: “Why do people join in religious communities? The Reverend. John Buehrens, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1993 to 2001, notes how central such communities are to the quest for a meaningful life: “To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.”<sup>i</sup>

As we grow and expand our intellects and our viewpoints and our feelings, we continuously look for meaning. We also **create** meaning in all we do, simply by the way we go about living every day.

Some of you may recall Viktor Frankl’s story of his survival in a Nazi concentration camp, entitled “Man’s Search for Meaning”.<sup>ii</sup> He refused to become disheartened, however miserable he was physically. While others round him died, Viktor Frankl put meaning into every miserable, boring day by caring for others, realizing that his life could have meaning even as a prisoner of war. He lived every day hopefully, and imparted hope to others, in their prison community. Frankl vowed to live **purposefully**, rather than **passively**.

We become more human and lead richer lives by continuously and intentionally staying in the process of becoming. When we have a sense of purpose in life, it is easier for us to think in terms of who and what sort of persons we want to become. And it is good to reflect on that from time to time, just to make sure we haven’t gotten stuck or in a rut. We are in a state of continuous change, consciously and unconsciously. We can consider carefully how to direct our lives, to what purpose, to create a more meaningful and fulfilling life. We can live intentionally.

But it is difficult to accomplish on our own. We need other people to be with, talk with, share ideas and affection with, and to learn from. We need other people to laugh with, and to comfort us and encourage us. The great joy of a religious community is that a good, healthy one abounds with generosity of spirit, helpfulness, and enthusiasm. An unhealthy religious community can be rigid, cliquish, and secretive. Our denomination encourages transparency in all we do – our budgeting and financial expenditures, our meetings, all are open to scrutiny by and sharing with the entire membership. This church also operates openly, and encourages the free flow of information. We all share in the welfare of the church, and we all benefit from the openness and good faith we demonstrate

when we work together.

Do we have issues? Certainly. Do we have conflicts? From time to time. Do people sometimes get mad and leave? Occasionally. But more often than not, we are able to subsume our own preferences and work for the greater good. We do that by stepping back when we have strong opinions, and by transforming conflicts into problems. Problems are solvable. Conflicts, on the other hand, often end up with winners and losers. In church conflicts, the loser is always the religious community and its fulfilling spirit. We need to take the time, and it does take time, to have discussions that may be exhausting, but that result in decisions that are for the good of the church as a whole. That's the star that must be our guide, the building and rebuilding and rearranging that has to occur to feed and nourish the greater religious community that is our church.

All this year, we have been working to make changes so that our community will function more effectively as well as more efficiently. People make fun of Unitarians because we have long meetings. And we laugh at ourselves, as we should. But all those discussions, all those problem-solving sessions, all that relinquishing of personal preferences for the good of the whole, all the respectful listening help to nourish the religious community. We learn and grow ourselves. Healthy churches are more about healthy relationships than winning arguments.

This isn't just any community. The church is a community with a higher purpose, to serve not only our own needs but to serve the larger community and to transform not only ourselves but the world.

As we honor those who guide our children and youth, our new members, and our new board of trustees, let us create meaning in the ways we live. Let us show affection to those who might do us harm. Let us listen to ideas that we don't agree with, search for common ground, and recall that to the extent we do that well, we strengthen this community of love and respect. We free energies to become better persons, to be together in joy and laughter and service, and to know that we belong to a profoundly fulfilling and enriching community. May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Buehrens, John. *Belonging: Commission on Appraisal*, p. 1. 2001. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association.

<sup>ii</sup> Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. 1959. Boston: Beacon Press.