

**First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
Dedication Sunday, October 26, 2008**

**“Connectedness”
Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.**

When I decided to talk with you this morning about “Connectedness” it seemed to me like an ideal way to reflect on the joys of our traditions here at First Unitarian. The dedication of our church and parish hall together, all the years of cooperative, collaborative fellowship and worship, the hard work together and the values and religious dedication that has connected us all through the years. And, of course, I thought about the interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part.

But I hadn’t thought about the possibilities of how our interconnectedness could transform the world into near panic, recession, and terrifying economic anxieties. If you ever doubted your potential to influence your world as an individual, I suggest it is time to throw those doubts out the window. Just look at the havoc wrought by a few hundred financiers and government officials, confident in the free unregulated marketplace, and that ever-increasing leverages would continue to profit. That the invisible hand would continue to work in the favor of accumulating profits.

Well, we are indeed all connected, in more ways than we might appreciate or enjoy these days. As I wrote in my recent pastoral letter, published in “Happenings,” I used to have a retirement account! Here I am, at age 74 next month, unable to consider retirement because the value of the small nest egg I have managed to build since I began my professional career in 1985 has plummeted to half its worth last year. I’m fortunate, because my health is excellent, I have a career I love, and I plan to enjoy working for a long time.

But what if I couldn’t work? What if, like so many of my generation, I depended on a small pension or returns from a 401K or investments in IRAs over the years, or Social Security? The havoc wrought by a relatively

small number of individuals, driven by over-optimism, greed, and a misguided faith in 18th and 19th century economic theories has transformed the world, and all of us, into an interconnected, global web of uncertainty and anxiety over day-to-day survival. People are losing their homes, their jobs, their incomes, their cars, having to sell possessions at a loss to buy groceries. The same interconnectedness that sent the cloud of 1816 over the world is sending ripples and waves of financial darkness over a world that had developed too much confidence in a market economy now run amuck.

Those of us who have been prudent, careful, cautious are forced to bail out the greedy villains who got us into this mess. What a bummer! And the problems and interconnectedness of the problems are so complex that the folks who are supposed to be fixing them can't get their arms around the forces, the issues, the variables in order to resolve the problems. Worse, many of the people who are struggling to fix the problems are products of the same financial institutions and economic theories that got us into this mess in the first place.

It is indeed a time to pause and reflect on the nature of things. The nature of our connectedness. Our joys and fellowship, the care we show for one another, our mutual interdependence, the nature of our relationships, and our mutual responsibilities toward one another.

I confess that I had never thought through all the implications of connectedness, and how misfortune might travel all through the web of life and the world. I have always loved the wonder of our connectedness to each other, to others in the world, to nature, to other forms of life, to the bugs and trees and plants and flowers. I have embraced the globalization of our economies, hopeful that in time a fairer system that provided for more people would develop. I always have thought of our interconnectedness in positive terms. In a sort of idealized one-world perspective. The humanity of all. The interrelationships of humans and animals and other forms of life. A perennial optimist, I always knew that we have to work to make the world a better place, rather than leave things to chance, but my life and thinking have always been hopeful. Perhaps in denial of the kind of crisis we now

find ourselves in. I still feel optimistic, but have to think hard to explain why.

Thinking back to crisis theory...is this a tragedy or an opportunity?

For many, there is no question that it is a tragedy. A tragedy of homelessness, of poverty, of loss of a sense of empowerment, a loss of perception of being in control, a feeling of being victimized, and worst of all, a feeling of hopelessness. For many, our connectedness and interconnectedness has become an economic and financial tragedy that pervades our sense of self, our self-efficacy, our lost hopes and dreams. This is not funny. This has human dimensions and aspects that don't show up on the financial charts. This is about hope destroyed, loss of hope for the future, loss of empowerment and mockery of the old idea that if we just work hard enough, everything will be alright. This is wholesale betrayal, and for many a tragedy that will require months and years of hard work and recovery, simply to regain financial stability, credit-worthiness, and the feeling of self-respect that has been snatched from us. This tragedy is infuriating. We are living under a big dark cloud that is not of our making. It hangs over us, dispensing depression and hopelessness, just like the cloud of 1816.¹ I am angry. I am very angry at the irresponsibility and greed on the part of our political and government leaders that got us into this. I can hardly wait until November 4th.

But no one, no leader, no financial wizard, however brilliant or well-intentioned, is going to be able to reverse this miserable situation and lead us to rapid recovery, much less to the promised land.

So, how do we get through it? All of us. Those of us who are drastically hurt, and those of us whose hurt is deep, but less potentially fatal.

¹ In 1816 a volcanic eruption, presumably in Indonesia, sent a volcanic cloud all over the east coast of North America, making it impossible to grow fruits and vegetables and other crops, and darkening and chilling the sky for months. During this time, leaders of this church decided to build our church, selected the current site, and proceeded with construction. This Sunday is the 190th anniversary of the date we commemorate as the dedication of our building.

Those who have deeper pockets and whose financial hurt is more or less temporary...who still have homes and jobs, just no retirement account to count on.

How do we get through it. Well, if I knew, I'd be president or something big and powerful. I don't know how we get through it. So I am going back to the core of my being. Who am I? What am I about? What do I believe in? What is important to me? What do I value? What do I stand up for? What is important in life? What is the meaning of life? Does any of that matter? So what? What is it – other than the alarm clock -- that gets us out of bed in the morning? Do we matter in the world? In our communities? In our church?

Are we going to let those greedy, irresponsible incompetents get us down, ruin our lives? I say, NO! We have value beyond our finances. We are important to each other. We are a gentle, angry people. We stand for justice for all, opportunity for all, and respect for everyone, regardless of background or social status. We are an inclusive, not exclusive people. We thrive on our shared values and connectedness to one another.

So, how do we transform tragedy into challenging opportunity? How do we beguile the sun to break through the dark cloud? How do we regain our sense of worth and empowerment, and thrust financial uncertainty into a larger perspective?

Well, some things we can control. And some things we can't control. What can we control?

- **Our sense of purpose and commitment.** Our engagement with our families, our church, our communities, and the world. What is really important? And how do we live in those terms? Do we sit back and grieve, or do we grow into more vital, centered, self-assured and committed people? This is an awful test, but maybe, just maybe, we can learn and grow from it. How can we engage more with our neighbors? How can we collaborate and share rides or cooperative grocery

shopping? How can we use this challenge to foster a stronger sense of community with our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues? Are we waiting for someone to do something for us, or are we looking out for something we can do for others?

- **Fighting off hopelessness and powerlessness.** Yes, what we do matters. Yes, our vote can help change the world. Yes, we do make a difference when we choose to step outside our hopeless feelings and do something for someone else. Tutor a child. Help a neighbor rake leaves. Repair something in the house that we've been putting off. Get it done. Paint that room. Fix that window. Clean out that garage. Join that committee at the church. Teach a religious education class. What we do matters. We are not helpless or powerless, we can make a difference. We are remarkably resilient, especially when we acknowledge our capabilities, however small they may seem to us. Surprise yourself by making a list of all your accomplishments and achievements in life so far. Can't think of anything? Start with learning to speak, and read. Like to sing? Join the choir and become part of a bigger voice that rejoices and brings joy to others. Curious? Take part in an adult religious education course. Good with computers? Maybe you can help with the website. We all have potential, we all can make a difference. We are **not powerless**. And no situation is hopeless. But we do need to reach into our hearts and our inner core and search our souls and then choose how to empower ourselves. We are all important, and most especially we are important to one another.
- **Rejoice in change.** Life will never be the same for any of us. Today we are facing new challenges and fumbling our way through unknown territory. Is it scary? It is for me, that's for sure. I liked it the way it was, pretty much. I knew what to expect before all this craziness struck us. I

wasn't worried about retirement. I was unhappy with our government and the way our politicians run things, but I figured I could change it on election day. I had no idea that my future would be turned upside down, that my future comfort would be transformed into disarray and uncertainty. It's not easy, but this is a change that I am learning to rejoice in. Because I know if I let the worries consume me I will regress into someone less than I am. I refuse to let that happen. No, this is a challenge that I will work through. I'm not sure how, but what is most important is to use this experience to learn some new ways of doing, some new ways of thinking, some new ways of being with myself and with others. What more can I do to inform myself? What more can I do to serve you? What more can I do to think in new and different ways? What more can I do to interpret life with more awareness? How can I be a better resource to my children and grandchildren? How can I be a better friend? How can I be a better neighbor? What more can I do to create meaning in my life?

An older lady who lives in my building needs to go to the DMV to get a handicapped sticker for her car. Why don't I offer to take her, for Pete's sake? She's all alone in this world. Probably shouldn't be driving, but when she does she needs to be able to park close to her destination.

The point is, that I can either regard this change with despair, or I can look at it as a way to expand myself, my being, my skills, to improve my relationships with others, to build new relationships.

Whatever the change or challenge, I can choose to look at it as an opportunity rather than a threat, and if I act on those feelings, I can become stronger. By doing nothing, by giving in to threat and uncertainty and anxiety,

I will become despondent and unhappy. So, as my grandson would say, “Bring it on.”

- **Connectedness.** Well, here we are together. The dark cloud of 1816 did not destroy the hopes and dreams of the builders of this church. And the dark clouds of 2008 will not destroy us, as long as we have one another and continue our tradition of resolve. We are all connected. We share a love for one another and for our country, our city, and for this fine church. We can rely on one another. We can share with one another. This is a friendly place for all, for all ages. We can share our joys and sorrows. We have much to give each other and much to gain from one another. We have much to learn and we have much to do.

Let our sense of purpose and commitment, our faith in our inner strength and ability to make a difference, our joy in the challenges of change, and our connectedness guide us as we struggle through the coming days and weeks and years. Let no dark cloud darken our spirits or rain on our parade. Let the spirit that brings us together connect us in more powerful ways and strengthen our resolve, strengthen our love, and strengthen our connectedness.

Amen