**“Truly Meeting, Connecting, and Appreciative Inquiry**”

**The Unitarian Church of Lincoln**

**2016**

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten

that we belong to each other.”

― [Mother Teresa](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/838305.Mother_Teresa)

***Gathering of the Community***

**Ringing of Bell**

**Welcome and Announcements:** Board Host

**Prelude:** Sonata No. 1 for Flute and Piano,

1. Allegro Moderato by Bohuslav Martinu

Lindsay Bartlett, flute

David Breckbill, piano

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** from G. Woods

 read by Barb Brant, Worship Associate

**Opening words:** from Kathleen McTigue

 read by the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

**Hymn:** #56 “Bells in the High Tower

***Time for all ages***

**Story:**

**Children’s Song**: #392 “Hineh Mah Tov”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “New Year’s Day” by Kathleen McTigue

**Musical Interlude:** Barb Brant

**Sermon:** “Truly Meeting, Connecting,

and Appreciative Inquiry”

**Offering and Offertory:** Morceau de Concours

by Gabriel Faure,

Lindsay Bartlett and David Breckbill

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Meditation**

***Integration and Release***

**Meditative Interlude:** Flute Sonata in D op. 94,

II. Scherzo by Sergei Prokofiev

**Closing Hymn:** #350 “The Ceaseless Flow of

Endless Time

**Extinguish the Chalice/Closing Words:**

From Kathleen McTigue

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***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** from G. Woods

As we enter an arbitrarily assigned new beginning,

we kindle a flame to guide us on our way,

knowing that we cannot fully perceive

how this flame shows a way forward,

but aware our memories and hopes reveal

how we decide our next steps.

May we pay attention to possibilities

revealed by the light of the values we share.

**Opening words:** from Kathleen McTigue

We come together this morning to remind one another

To rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,

To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment.

Until we claim for ourselves

Awareness and gratitude,

Taking the time to look into one another’s faces

And see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.

This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope,

Is hallowed by our presence together.

**Hymn:** #56 “Bells in the High Tower

***Time for all ages***

**Story**

**Children’s Song**: #392 “Hineh Mah Tov”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “New Year’s Day” by Kathleen McTigue

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms, with or without our calendars to name a certain day as the day of new beginning, separating the old from the new.

So it is: everything is the same, bound into its history as we ourselves are bound. Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands: what shall we do with this great gift of Time, this year?

Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year, we are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of all the best visions of our people. The new year can be new ground for the seeds of our dreams. Let us take the step forward together, onto new ground, planting our dreams well, faithfully, and in joy.

**Musical Interlude:**

**Sermon:** “Truly Meeting, Connecting,

and Appreciative Inquiry”

“Meeting, Connecting, and Appreciative Inquiry” What a pedantic sermon title! It sounds like a psychology lecture. I am amazed any of you came today through the winter cold of Nebraska to hear me share some ruminations along these lines. But then, is this really so far removed from our every day lives? Still, I am aware most of you come to engage the community that you love here: more on that in a bit.

 When I looked at this title again after I changed it at least once, the first thing I thought of was not a classroom, but a dog park. Yes, a dog park! I am amazed at how thoroughly –particularly as individuals - dogs behave similarly to humans. Some rush up to others, sniff intrusively, and begin to play without a “by your leave.” Others hold back, avoid initial contact, observe the group dynamics, and make specific choices for actual interaction. Those are the two poles of a spectrum of behaviors that are clearly demonstrated by dogs – not so unlike human beings after all. Some of you will argue against the analogy, but do give it some consideration. Or, at the least, step back for some thoughtful observation of the people you know.

 With that image in mind, let us press forward with our topic for the day: truly meeting, connecting, and appreciative inquiry.

 How often do we truly meet someone? In my experience, we make acquaintances with many people, but truly meet few. Rasheed Ogunlaru offers this advice: “Be genuinely interested in everyone you meet and everyone you meet will be genuinely interested in you.” I have not found this always to be true, but I do agree with Anais Ninn when she writes, “[Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/anaisnin132043.html)” This is what I call true meeting, coming upon someone who resonates with us in such a way that both are transformed. C.G. Jung affirms this notion: “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

 But no one can be transformed until connections are made: the chemicals need to interact, and they cannot interact until they go beyond meeting to connection. As many of you know, there may need to be a catalyst: an idea, a shared image, a common interest that takes each and both beyond meeting to connecting. “Did you see “Star Wars: The Force Awakens?” Oh, yes!” – and the connecting is off to a start and perhaps a deep conversation - or a dead end. One of you may not be a fan of fantasy at all and scoffs at any hint of magic. Oh, well, a connection is broken. On the other hand, even if that is so, you may find an idea about greed being a source of corruption, or styles of leadership, or championing of women and the poor, that surmounts differences about fantasy, and you are back to connecting. Many possibilities, no guarantees. But consider the possibilities: you might end up working together on a major project supported by the Unitarian Universalist Association through “Standing on the Side of Love,” just from the process of connecting. Who knows?

At the very least, once you connect, you have a better sense of whether you can go forward together with this person on some life-changing journey. How often do we make the time to listen to each other enough to connect? And if we do not truly listen to each other, we never do connect.

As human beings, most of us crave intimacy, friendship, being known and knowing another more deeply and fully. This is the goal of meeting and connecting. It is the goal of the Open Circles that Larry Gregg and I are continuing. We know that people do not integrate within any group unless they develop a “tender circle” of at least six friends beyond the leadership of the organization, whatever the organization may be. We also know that people need a “third place” beyond their home and work to have a rich life. It may be a bowling league or Veterans of Foreign Wars or a knitting group, but often it is found within one’s church. If it is not, one may never connect with that church, regardless of the resonance with its theology – or lack of theology.

At the heart of connecting is hearing compassionately each other’s stories. This is where Appreciative Inquiry comes in. Often when we listen, we are actually engaged in “ego-speak,” wherein we are preparing our rebuttal without consciously listening for the point of the person’s story. I used to do this all the time: plan my counter-version of the story to bring myself to the center of the group. Lousy way to actually connect with anyone, let me tell you! But I also had the memory of my mother patiently listening to people in our kitchen, drawing them out of themselves, then asking clarifying questions that led them to greater understanding of themselves. That sort of seeped into my consciousness as well. I could see the merit of it for both my own self-understanding and the speaker’s understanding. There is deeper connection in the latter process.

So what is this Appreciative Inquiry? Some have touted it as a way to avoid critical responses or negative personalities, but that is not its intent. According to David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney in *A Positive Revolution in Change*:

Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. A(ppreciative) I(nquiry) involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question” often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. In AI the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this “positive change core”—and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.

Wheww! That is powerful stuff, if it is even possible. It is what you all did to co-create the renovation of this building. Simply put, Appreciative Inquiry, invites people to tell their stories of inspiration, participation, and success, in such a way that stimulates their energies to actually “do something,” instead of just talk about it. It gets people’s juices flowing so that they *need* to move forward positively and collectively. In essence, it unveils a mission and the means to bring it to fruition. In the words of my spiritual teacher, Suzanne Scurlock-Durana, it involves connecting with my inner knowing, my Source, and bringing all my power-from-within to join that of others with similar dreams. Another way to put it relative to a congregation is to discern the community’s shared vision and move forward with it in the context of its culture.

 This is what the Cottage Meetings we begin the last weekend in January are meant to do, and it provides the means to do it: to find out what has made your hearts and minds sing together and to put that into your mission statement and Main Thing that you can do together over the next five years. If you know these things, you are far better equipped to tell your potential candidates for minister what they are, so that they can share the decision about how you could move forward together and create a congregation that is truly alive.

 The Transition Team will be providing sheets for you to sign up for these meetings, the Open Circles will use Appreciative Inquiry for one of the February meetings to do the same. All are invited to participate, so that your Mission and Main Thing reflect most fully all of the ideas and energies here within this congregation. That is not to say that every idea can be the Main Thing, but that one will surface that reflects the largest vision of all of you. Please know that other ideas will have their day as well, as you develop as a community. And no current program will be terminated, unless it is already broken. In systems analysis, we often say, “If it’s broke, don’t fix it!”

 I will provide training in facilitation of Appreciative Inquiry today: Sunday, January 10, after the service here; then again at 6:45 pm on Wednesday, January 20 and Thursday, January 21. All are invited to participate, even if you do not want to facilitate a Cottage Meeting. We feel that everyone will benefit from knowing how this works and how you can do it within other organizations, including your families. Some of you will be approached by the Transition Team to provide facilitation for the Cottage Meetings, others may just want to understand what is going on. Again, all are welcome.

 So this New Year, this new beginning, provides many opportunities to extend your self-understanding, your interpersonal skills, and your sense of larger community. It’s up to you whether you choose to engage. I can tell you that this is an exciting journey within and without, one that will enrich your life and those of loved ones around you. Please do give it careful consideration, and keep your sense of proportion and good humor.

 As Washington Irving has written:

 “[We may have our private opinions but why should they be a bar to the meeting of hearts?](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mahatmagan160800.html)

[Honest good humor is the oil and wine of a merry meeting, and there is no jovial companionship equal to that where the jokes are rather small and laughter abundant.](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/washington403153.html)

May we truly meet, connect, and appreciatively inquire of one another with respect, responsibility, and relish for the process. So Be It. Blessed Be!

**Offering and Offertory:**

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Meditation**

***Integration and Release***

**Meditative Interlude:**

**Closing Hymn:** #350 “The Ceaseless Flow of

Endless Time

**Extinguish the Chalice/Closing Words**

From Kathleen McTigue

May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast to that we seek.

May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of our world.

Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives,

The weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.