Ragged individualism is a phrase used by author Gregg Levoy to describe a certain misguided concept of self-reliance that keeps people from asking for help, even when they need it the most. The phrase is an apt description of the isolation and loneliness rampant in our culture today. I don’t think this is quite what Ralph Waldo Emerson had in mind when he wrote his famous essay on self-reliance.

Community is the antidote to ragged individualism

Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, cites a study published in the American Sociological Review in 1985 and repeated in 2004. The findings were so startling they made both the New York Times and the Washington Post. One key question asked participants how many people they know with whom they can confide personal information.

Morales summarizes the study results this way: “... almost half of Americans—half—only half have a single, close relationship outside of the household. Imagine that. Imagine that.”

This translates to a huge number of “ragged individuals,” hungry for what a religious community such as ours has to offer. People are hungry for connection – human connection that is real and trustworthy. It’s a spiritual hunger.

Morales says the we can be the religion for our time. I agree. If we at UUCT are to be the religion for our time here in Tucson, I need your help.

Don’t worry. I’m not asking for money. Yes, the church always needs money, but I’m asking for something far more valuable. I’m asking you to offer the best of who you are that we might create the kind of community that feeds a spiritual hunger. I can’t do it alone.

I need your good will. The church community is made of human beings. Part of being human is being imperfect, limited, and subject to brokenness. When mistakes are made, as they will be – by me, church staff, church leaders, and church members – I need you to assume good intent. These days, lives are stretched thin by economic realities and family obligations. Everyone is doing the best they can, and that’s all that can be asked of anyone.

I need you to support your elected and appointed church leaders. The institution of the church relies on human effort for its maintenance. I need you to support those who do the work of maintaining the institution – even when you disagree with what they do or how they do it. They give of themselves on behalf of the whole congregation. In general, people are more motivated by praise and thanks than they are by blame and criticism. I need you to thank people who do work for the church.

I need you to do the spiritual work of making friends with newcomers. Those who come through our doors for the first, second, or third time are spiritually hungry. They come here to heal their ragged souls. They need you – yes you – to make a connection and help them to become part of our congregational community.

Galen Guengerich, Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City says “When God is no longer supernatural, religion becomes more important, not less.” Transcendence is found in those moments of loving and being loved – in relationship – in religious community.

We can be the religion for our time. Will you help me make it so?

Diane
My father enjoys telling a story from his time as the music director for the Georgia Methodist Pastor’s Retreat in the early 1990s, when Tony Campolo was giving the keynote address. Campolo, an evangelical, red-letter Christian that served in an urban Southside Chicago church at the time, had a reputation for powerful oratory and speaking truth to power. Dad was sitting in one of Georgia’s largest Methodist sanctuary’s, slightly behind Campolo, in plain view of room full of preachers. And Campolo said, “Yesterday, 100’s of people died of starvation in our world.” He paused, and then continued, “Yesterday, 100’s of people died of starvation, and you people don’t give a $!?&!.” The pause this time was longer, and I imagine it from the perspective of my father who stared out at the room full of people wrestling with how they would react to Campolo’s assessment of their Christian charity. He finished his thought by saying, “Yesterday, 100s of people died of starvation in our world, and you people are more concerned that I said $!?&! in this sanctuary, than that 100s of people died yesterday.” From my Dad’s perspective looking into the room, Campolo appeared to have evaluated his audience accurately. Campolo’s message to the Methodist ministers in the room was, in part, to remember that community extends beyond any church’s walls, and includes those that never make it into the sanctuary. I’ve been thinking of this story a lot since the Tucson Medical examiner stated that 252 immigrants died in Arizona’s desert in the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30th, 2010. I wonder how many of those people died of starvation, or dehydration. I wonder, more importantly, whether or not I give a $!?&!. What am I doing to acknowledge that my understanding of my community is worthless if it doesn’t rally against senseless death? Questions like these inspired me to collaborate with Jim Marx of No More Deaths to organize a benefit concert on Nov. 6th. I sought singers from Tucson’s folk and singer/songwriter community, which met with universal approval and support. The performers that could commit to the event will provide a range of acoustic guitar and vocal music to lift your spirits, and the proceeds raised will hopefully help heal and sustain humans that might die without the intervention. Please show you care, about Tucson’s music community, about a ministry of our church, and about people who are dying needlessly on the doorstep of our community.

Tickets are on sale after church on Sundays and at the door.

Thank you,
Brian

Taking time to come into community with others who share our beliefs and values is vital for being able to live a life that honors all of our principles and is also important for our overall well being. Just recently I attended a “Cluster Meeting” of Unitarian Universalist staff in Chandler, AZ. Ohhh how I did not want to go! I am preparing for another trip this weekend for LREDA Fall Conference and have so much to do to make sure that things run smoothly in my absence. Valid as our excuses may be, we tend to forget the importance of community in the balance of our lives.

Well, I went anyway. I am back today refreshed, charged up for upcoming social action events, and have a new found confidence for doing my job. This is what being in a shared community is all about. Have you been to a church event lately? What are you missing by not being with your fellow UUs? Are you taking time to be in community?