

[Video](#) of Emperor Penguins Huddling

“By keeping constantly on the move, no penguin is left out in the cold.”

Isn't nature great? Thousands of penguins move together, take tiny steps, keep shifting from the interior of the huddle to the margins, so that all might survive the harsh conditions around them.

These were all male Emperor penguins who are charged with incubating their single egg during the winter conditions in Antarctica. It's been known for a while that the penguins huddle, but it just recently that investigators, Daniel Zitterbart and his team at the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Bremerhaven, Germany, filmed the huddles and analysed each penguin's movements.¹ They learned more fascinating details about the phenomenon. The huddles can form for from 12 minutes to a few hours but generally last about 50 minutes.

We can learn a lot from nature here. For one thing, although a huddle is formed, no one is left on the margins the entire time. During that time, the temperature of the birds can get close to 100 degrees. The perpetual motion makes sure that heat is distributed evenly. This redistribution ensures the health and well-being of the whole.

Second, it only takes one penguin to initiate the small wave steps and any penguin in the group can lead. It also only takes one penguin, generally on the outer edges, to break up the huddle. There are no leader penguins which tell everyone what to do and where to go – they just pay attention and make tiny adjustments with different birds taking the lead the whole time.

And third, very tiny steps actually make a big difference in the experience of the members as a whole. While the steps are no more than a few inches, even those tiny continuous movements make a difference. They look identical, and yet it is the individual actions of these creatures which affect all of them in a particular huddle.

Today is the final in a series of three sermons looking at our faith community.

In the first we talked about being truly welcoming, not only to other people, but to all the unacceptable, unfinished or broken parts of ourselves. We left that sermon with me asking –

How much pain and sorrow, suffering and even joy – do we suppress so we can be acceptable? And – should we really have to do that in our faith home – in the place which is supposed to bring us closest to the deepest truths of our lives?

Last Sunday we examined a different aspect of the changing dynamics of church life. Franki Tilbrook and Steve Trout helped me to explore some of the many layers of the changing racial & gender populations in our faith tradition. We looked through the lens of white men, how their place in the world is evolving and how we might understand and respond to the emotions that arise out of those changes.

And finally this week, we are interacting with three questions that were posed at General Assembly this past summer. I'm going to let Elandria Williams & Mr Barb Greve share their introduction:

Video

1. When is a time that you felt “the power of we” in Unitarian Universalism?
2. What is so important in Unitarian Universalism that you would be willing to sacrifice for it?
3. What will it take for Unitarian Universalism to fully embody “the power of we”?

These questions are designed to get us thinking about what it means to be a faith community – and what we need to do to make sure we create the kind of community we believe in and long to share with the world. I’m going to ask you to take about a minute now to think of the first question:

When was a time you felt the ‘power of we’ in Unitarian Universalism? Now this was a no-brainer for people who are at our General Assembly. It is the die-hard UU’s who travel to some far-flung city and spend four days with 5000 of their closest friends. It’s not something most of us here have experienced – although if you have, please share your experience. But – in any area of your life – when was a time that you felt connected – felt like part of something wonderful and connected.

I have to admit that my first General Assembly gave me that feeling – seeing thousands of my folks walking around with their goofy credentials with a million ribbons dangling down; attending workshops on things I’d never even considered before. I definitely found my folks. But I also felt it at the first women’s march in downtown Chicago – surrounded by many of you. It felt amazing to be connected to people who all wanted a world where everyone was welcome – where all people were recognized as worthy of respect.

You each have some post-it notes and a pencil. If not, raise your hand and we’ll get it to you. Sit for a moment and think of a time when you felt the ‘power of we’ and write a brief synopsis. When I ring the gong I want you to find someone near you to share your story. Please look around. If someone is left out – invite them into a group of 3. It’s more important that everyone gets a chance to share.

Gong....

Anyone want to share?

Now hold onto those post-its and put a number 1 on it. Our next question is a little trickier. What is so important about your UU faith that you would be willing to sacrifice for it? Sacrifice brings up a lot of images – parents sacrificing sleep all the time to provide a good and loving environment for their children. People working numerous jobs to provide for their families. Soldiers going off to war to protect our safety. And many of you sacrifice your time and energy already for this church community. People make sacrifices for things that matter to them. So what is the core of your faith – that kernel that means so much to you that you are willing to feel uncomfortable.

A few weeks ago, I caused some discomfort in the room when I used the phrase ‘have your shit together’ and offended some people. It’s come back to me from a couple different directions.

First, let me apologize. My intention was not to offend. It seems I didn't explain well enough the point of my using those words. It was an example. I was talking about how some of us have to put away parts of ourselves in order to fit into the ethos of many UU churches – we have to put away our broken parts, or our working class parts, or our ethnic identities or cultures that aren't acceptable. People of color, of different cultural identities and those living on the margins of society often have to push down much of who they are in order to be in UU churches; have to give up a lot to fit in.

Swearing seemed an innocuous example of that, because really, what harm does a word do? But not swearing is a strong, white, middle class value. Now my mom, a working-class lady, used language that would make the proverbial sailor blush. All the time. Dinner time was laced with casual f-bombs – it was how she talked. And she was one of the most loving and kind and generous people that I've ever known. Her language did not lessen her humanity.

But I wanted better for my life and my kids, so I worked hard to clean up my language. I used weird phrases like “Fudgsicles & popped corn!” to get those pesky f-bombs out of my language & it mostly worked. They're still in there somewhere but it's not a battle anymore.

But there is nothing intrinsically bad about any word. It's just the degree of disapproval society has placed around them – and I call it middle class because my wife, Karen, worked in the upper echelons of corporate America before she went to seminary. She was up there in the corner offices and traveling all around the world with big muckety-mucks – and she reports they swear like sailors as well. Her language degraded a grade deal during that part of her life.

Because the language we use puts us into a certain part of life and identifies the class we aspire to. People with real power -mostly all upper-class white guys – and women who were trying to fit into that culture -don't have to listen to middle class rules anymore and use profanity to express their disdain for such strictures.

All very interesting Rev Pam – but why did you say “shit” in church – and more than once? I intended it as a revelation of my working class roots. This is how my people talk. And I had to give it up to be able to fit into this faith.

But, if you reacted negatively to those words, I'm going to ask you to pay attention to why. Words are just words and they only have the power we assign to them. And the power of a reaction to “bad” words *is* the kind of invisible metal detector that keeps people from feeling comfortable – from being able to bring their whole selves into our churches.

I'm not saying that profanity is good or bad. I'm saying know why you react the way you do – figure it out and explore the underlying assumptions and fears. Maybe you're not using profanity in your life to make sure your kids don't learn it so they can succeed in our society as it is today. Maybe you do use profanity to express your disdain for the strictures that middle-class society places on people. It really doesn't matter what – but it does matter that we act with self-awareness and are open to changing if long-time habits of acculturation don't actually serve us.

People of color often suffer multiple instances of microaggressions, of ‘us/them’ language, of ignorance around their real history and experiences in our churches all the time. So do trans folk

and people living with invisible disabilities. Maybe you are already giving up a lot to be here each week. The question before us right now is why. My answer is that I came into this faith because I wanted to be with people who lived the values I hold. Who affirm the worth and dignity of every person – who believe we are part of an interconnected web.

What is so important about this faith that you can continue to come, despite the places of sacrifice? Write down a few words to describe your answer. Then talk again with your groups of 2 or 3.

Gong. Anyone willing to share what you came up with?

Our final question may take more time than we have now to answer – but that’s okay. We have all the time we need to continue this conversation in the future. The question is; what will it take for Unitarian Universalism to fully embody “the power of we”? What will it take for all of us to evolve our faith into one where the same people don’t have to sacrifice most of the time? Where you don’t have to leave parts of yourself at the door?

I want you to sit for a moment and think about what you need to be fully here, in this faith, in this church. Jot down a word or phrase on your third post-it. Now turn to the person near you one more time. Ask them; what do you need?

Gong. Anyone willing to share?

Now I have three posters here with our questions from today. Number your answers and bring them up and put them on our boards.

Each and everyone of us is a beloved child, a unique expression of that universe that is like no one else. We all yearn to feel connected, to know we matter, to believe that we belong to something much larger than our own small selves. When we create a “we” that is big enough to hold every person, we are bringing our values to life. When we love, whole-heartedly, when we are willing to examine assumptions and stretch through our discomfort, when we say the word “we” and everyday realize that includes one more person, we create the world we dream to have.

We can look to those adorable fuzzy birds in the black and white tuxedos and realize.

- We only have to take baby steps.
- Each and every one of us can lead from exactly where we are.
- Welcoming perspectives & voices from the margins creates a healthier and more sustaining environment for all of us.

It allows the power of love to infuse our entire community, to spread in ripples in every direction, to embody a “we” that might embrace the entire world. **Amen & blessed be.**

ⁱ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn24763-start-stop-traffic-helps-penguin-huddles-grow/>