

Alone Together
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We are electronically networked like never before. As we breathe in and out, cell phones are bouncing signals from our purses and pockets to cell towers and satellites. In the blink of an eye, cell towers and satellites are bouncing signals back to those phones in our purses and pockets. Just out of curiosity, how many people in this sanctuary have in their possession right now a smart phone that enables you to send a text message or an email message across the Internet? This homily is for *you*. I begin with a familiar story.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Goldilocks.¹ She went for a walk in the forest. Pretty soon, she came upon a house. She knocked and, when no one answered, she walked right in.

At the table in the kitchen, there were three bowls of porridge. Goldilocks was hungry. She tasted the porridge from the first bowl.

"This porridge is too hot!" she exclaimed.

So, she tasted the porridge from the second bowl.

"This porridge is too cold," she said

So, she tasted the last bowl of porridge.

"Ahhh, this porridge is just right," she said happily and she ate it all up.

After she'd eaten the three bears' breakfasts she decided she was feeling a little tired. So, she walked into the living room where she saw three chairs. Goldilocks sat in the first chair to rest her feet.

¹ See http://www.dltk-teach.com/rhymes/goldilocks_story.htm.

"This chair is too big!" she exclaimed.

So she sat in the second chair.

"This chair is too big, too!" she whined.

So she tried the last and smallest chair.

"Ahhh, this chair is just right," she sighed. But just as she settled down into the chair to rest, it broke into pieces!

Goldilocks was very tired by this time, so she went upstairs to the bedroom. She lay down in the first bed, but it was too hard. Then she lay in the second bed, but it was too soft. Then she lay down in the third bed and it was just right. Goldilocks fell asleep.

As she was sleeping, the three bears came home.

"Someone's been eating my porridge," growled the Papa bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge," said the Mama bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge and they ate it all up!" cried the Baby bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair," growled the Papa bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair," said the Mama bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair and they've broken it all to pieces," cried the Baby bear.

They decided to look around some more and when they got upstairs to the bedroom, Papa bear growled, "Someone's been sleeping in my bed,"

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed, too" said the Mama bear

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed and she's still there!" exclaimed Baby bear.

Just then, Goldilocks woke up and saw the three bears. She screamed, "Help!" And she jumped up and ran out of the room. Goldilocks ran down the stairs, opened the door, and ran away into the forest. And she never returned to the home of the three bears.

"The world is now full of modern Goldilockses, people who take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay," believes Sherry Turkle. "A thirteen-year-old tells me she 'hates the phone and never listens to voicemail.' Texting offers just the right amount of access, just the right amount of control . . . for her, texting puts people not too close, not too far, but at just the right distance."² We are ambivalent about closeness, hence the "I love ambivalence" t-shirt on the cover of the Order of Service.

Sherry Turkle is a professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self and a clinical psychologist trained in the analytic tradition. Sherry Turkle has been studying computer culture for 30 years. Her third book in a trilogy is now out. It is called *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.

"The new technologies allow us to 'dial down' human contact, to titrate its nature and extent," she observes. "Online, we easily find 'company' but are exhausted by the pressures of performance. We enjoy continual connection but rarely have each other's full attention. We can have instant audiences but flatten out what we say to each other in new reductive genres of abbreviation. We like it that the Web 'knows' us, but this is only possible because we compromise our privacy, leaving electronic bread crumbs that can be easily exploited, both politically and commercially."

"We have many new encounters but may come to experience them as tentative, to be put 'on hold' if better ones come along. Indeed, new encounters need not be better to get our attention. We are wired to respond positively to their simply being new. We can work from home, but our

² *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle, Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, New York, 2011, page 15.

work bleeds into our private lives until we can barely discern the boundaries between them. We like being able to reach each other almost instantaneously but have to hide our phones to force ourselves to take a quiet moment.”³ “The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy.”

It is undeniable that access to the Internet has an empowering potential – we can become lifelong, self-directed learners. We can stay in touch with family, friends, and colleagues virtually anywhere on the globe. Business can become more efficient. People with disabilities can communicate using amazing computer technology. One person with a disability who I know wants very much to find a way to contribute to the wellbeing of others. She goes to the Amnesty International website, learns of issues, and sends messages.

The advantages of being electronically connected are many. The problem is not so much the technology but the user. No matter where we go, there we are. We bring to the computer keyboard our consciousness, our human foibles. We bring our laziness. “Cut and paste” – sweet! We bring to the keyboard our insecurities. “I wonder what my “ex” is doing these days?” Time to check a Facebook page and quell a smug emotional response, should one arise. We bring to the keyboard our pettiness and hostility. “Flame wars” are wildfires. There is always tinder, and there are always sparks. The computer screen is like a mirror. It is our reflection that we glimpse in it.

Sherry Turkle, with her training as a psychologist, offers warnings. For example, there is the “paradox of electronic messaging”: You stare at a screen on your desk or in your hand. It is passive, and you own the frame; these promise safety and acceptance. In the cocoon of electronic messaging, we imagine the people we write to as we wish them to be; we write to that part of them that makes us feel safe. You feel in a place that is private and ephemeral. But your communications are public and forever.”⁴ “This is the anxiety of always . . . the protean self is challenged by the persistence of people and data.”⁵

³ Page 280.

⁴ Page 258.

⁵ Page 260.

Misuse of computer technology, including its compulsive overuse, can be a symptom of existential loneliness. We are not very good at solitude and reflection. “Loneliness is failed solitude,” Sherry Turkle observes.⁶ Our propensity to attach to the Internet is a red flag. The red flag means this: Danger! Reflection deficit ahead! Quiet time deficit ahead! Nourishing solitude deficit ahead!

If one problem of the digital age is an undermining of the will and skills to be reflective, another problem is the ease with which our bad habits can be reinforced. I refer to the bad habits of laziness and pettiness, as well as the various unattractive forms that our insecurities assume online. What is a Unitarian Universalist to do? Does our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition have a distinct way forward to guide us?

Yes. A way forward begins 125 years ago, when Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke included “salvation by character” as one of the five points of Unitarian theology.⁷ The theological formulation by him has been termed notoriously over-optimistic: “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”

I forgive people rhetorical flourishes. “Onward and upward forever”? That is a rhetorical flourish. Another day we can deconstruct the rest of James Freeman Clarke’s five points, which countered five theological points of orthodox Calvinism. Today, salvation by character is in the spotlight. If we had to explain salvation by character on a bumper sticker, it would read “Deeds, not creeds.” A slightly larger bumper sticker would contain the formulation of classical Greece: Thought leads to deeds leads to habit leads to character leads to destiny.

Salvation is a term with momentous theological implications in other religious traditions. Within Unitarian Universalism, it means what saves us, most often what saves us from ourselves. What saves us from disappointment, disillusionment, despair? Unitarian Universalist minister Steve Eddington distills Unitarian Universalist salvation into three points:

⁶ Page 288.

⁷ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jamesfreemanclarke.html>.

“First, it means coming to know self-acceptance or self-validation.⁸ A second component of the humanistic salvation, as I’m calling it, it to live with a sense of being a part of something greater than yourself . . . The third and final component of such salvation--somewhat related to the one just described--is the ability to see within even the smallest of efforts to improve, or to bring some measure of love and compassion to the human condition, the working out of a greater purpose or a greater good that will outlive your own time on earth.”

Now that we have a sense of the *salvation* part of the *salvation by character* phrase, what do Unitarian Universalists mean by *character*? Unitarian Universalist minister Davidson Loehr writes, “When we speak about character, we value the same things humans in all times and places have cared about: honesty, integrity, responsibility, authenticity moral courage Questions of character aren’t fancy . . . They include questions like these: How am I becoming a better partner, parent, neighbor, citizen, and world citizen? How have I built bridges toward those whose religious or political beliefs will always differ from mine, yet who are, as I am, limbs on the body of humanity? How is my life a blessing to a world not made in my image?”⁹

I conclude by urging the use of computer technology and online experiences as opportunities for developing character – for disciplining our thoughts so we can better prioritize our deeds so that we can reinforce beneficial habits so that our character will be a positive example for others. In that way, we will make our destiny. My contemporary update to the concept of “salvation by character” is “update by characterS” (plural). “Salvation by characters” has four parts:

First, salvation by all the *characters* that we type as we hunt and peck our way around the keyboard or text with quickly moving thumbs and fingers

Second, salvation by all the *characters/personas* that we adopt and project in the online world, whether those characters are in role-playing games, chat rooms, online dating websites, or Facebook pages

⁸ See <http://www.uunashua.org/sermons/salvation.shtml>

⁹ See http://www.meadville.edu/journal/2000_loehr_1_2.pdf.

Third, salvation by all the *characters* within ourselves that we introduce to each other; that is, by the peace we make with our own psychological shadow

Fourth, salvation by all the quirky *characters* that we associate with IRL (in real life), remembering that life is messy, and human lives are even messier.

We are embedded in human networks, not only in electronic networks. We hang together or we hang separately. Developing our own character is a powerful way to impact the wider world. May we bring greater consciousness to our electronic interactions and to our face to face interactions. May we create space in our lives for solitude and reflection – even if that means scheduling the time in an electronic calendar. May it be so!