

# *Friendship Recession*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

*Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel*

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*Cow's it Going? ©2023 Rod E.S.Q.*

Valentine's Day is nearly upon us, and it is customary in our Canadian culture to highlight romantic relationships around this time. Some of you may be planning a special dinner with a partner, or perhaps a card and gift exchange with them.

And... as if often the case with holidays, there may be some baggage around this holiday, as well. Perhaps your partner is no longer around, and this time may highlight their absence. Maybe you haven't had a partner in while and the emphasis on romantic love brings up feelings of exclusion (I've been there before). Or maybe a previous partnership has left scars or painful memories that don't seem conducive to celebration.

Is there a way to expand the meaning and focus of this day beyond the romantic dimension?

As it turns out, when I was growing up in Mexico, Valentine's Day was actually branded Love and Friendship Day (*Día del Amor y la Amistad*), such that romantic *and* platonic aspects of love were celebrated, offering a more inclusive holiday. In some places in Latin America this can include a "secret friends" practice, similar to our "secret Santa" tradition.

I have to say that I originally found it puzzling when that side of the holiday wasn't as prevalent here, when I first arrived in Canada – though I've seen versions of this expanded approach in elementary school and some workspaces, in which card and candy exchanges among peers is sometimes encouraged.

And, while holding friendships may be a more universal and inclusive experience than being in a current partnership, people who study populations have noticed that we may be having fewer friendships than what we used to have.

It seems that, amidst current talk of possible economic recessions, there may be a larger unseen recession going on... a friendship recession.

Last year, the Survey Center on American Life published findings that people currently report having fewer friends than before.

There are many reasons for this. The pandemic has certainly played a role in how we engage socially, and has complicated the calculations we might make for social interaction. But the trend goes beyond the past three years. Curiously, one factor has been identified as “declining religious involvement”.

It has also been observed that one group is particularly vulnerable in the friendship front – men. And this may be attributed to men being socialized to certain ideals of masculinity that discourage showing affection, or displaying vulnerability. This may be another illustration that – at least in some respects – patriarchal systems hurt everyone.

Age also seems to come into play, as it seems that adults have a harder time striking up new friendships than children.

As children, and perhaps young adults, we spend time in school settings that might make forming friendships seem like a low-effort enterprise for many of us, as constant exposure to peers of similar age, sharing a similar experience, and perhaps sharing similar life outlooks, offer an environment where nearly *any* situation might expose you to potential pals.

Later adulthood, however, reveals a different reality, where making new friends often requires additional intentionality, and competing life

priorities might easily drown out the importance of finding folks with whom we can find support, share vulnerability, and foster meaningful moments outside of work or home life.

Now, while it may be true that forming adult friendships often calls for some extra effort, it might not be as difficult as we might think.

For my partner and I, one of our newer friendships locally came by through a combination of happenstance as well as a measure of intentionality, and some willingness to take low-level risks.

A few years ago, not long after we arrived in the county, we attended a local agricultural fair. Dropping by the open-air Sunday service at the fair, I felt that the guest minister had said things that resonated with me and my approach to spirituality and community. After the service, I saw that he was hanging out near his church's tent. After a short contemplation, I thought: "Let's go say 'hi'."

Depending on your own... level of comfort with meeting strangers, this might represent a measure of risk. It could be an awkward meeting. Maybe the new acquaintance might have no interest in interacting with you – and this could feel like rejection. Or perhaps it may simply feel like too much effort, if you're in a space where you'd rather be on your own.

But, if you're looking for new connections, the stakes are probably worth it – and in all likelihood, the fears around them may be unfounded to begin with. You may find that others are more likely to engage than you might expect.

After introducing myself to this colleague from a different tradition, we struck a comfortable conversation. He and his wife were also fairly new to the area and didn't mind meeting new people, as it turns out. We got a dinner invitation on the spot. This, too, might have represented a level of effort – or perhaps risk – on their part. Either way, we found it to be

worth it, and we continue to make space and time for us to hang out. A couple weeks ago, the four of us went as a joint team at a trivia night, and we were excited to get to third place, being that we didn't feel particularly knowledgeable about the subject matter (then again, the award placings weren't the main point).

I have shared that this year, I'm following a theme of expanding connection and re-connection, and have found that phone contacts with friends and family I haven't talked to in a while are easier to do than I sometimes lead myself to believe. There's sometimes a sense of inertia when you haven't talked to someone in a while, and eventually, the reason you don't call them is... because you haven't called them. My experience lately, is that they're usually more than happy to hear from you again.

Here at the church of Olinda, our mission *and* practice include space for fostering friendship. The words to our Chalice Lighting invite us to offer fellowship, and call us to one community of warmth and light.

We see and hear concrete examples of this mission and practice. We uphold traditions of shared community meals – established and re-emerging. Some of you get together of your own account, building on your acquaintance from shared time and space in worship (and over the past weeks we have heard some of you sharing celebrations of these encounters).

Some of these manifestations come from the “institutional” dimension of our church, including the work of our Caring Committee, with an established mandate to connect with folks in vulnerable moments or facing prospects of isolation, as well as our Membership Team, who grow links among members and offer opportunities for community-building. Some manifestations are more organic, as you seek out your own deepening relationships with members and participants.

My friends, all of these require some level of effort and perhaps risk – and these are usually worth it. And as we remain mindful of this intentionality, we build upon the wealth of camaraderie that can shield us from the hazards of a friendship recession.

My friends, there is no shame in reaching out and making connections – we need these. During a holiday time that celebrates love, there is no need to limit the reach of affection to romantic relationships, which represent but one manifestation of special friendship. And platonic friendships may offer special connection of their own. Our platonic companions are more than “just” friends (as we sometimes call them), they are gifts of mutual support, havens for shared vulnerability, and sources of meaning-making. Like any investment, there are some initial costs and require work, and they can be risky, but the rate of return can yield infinite results as they mature.

My friends, in our community of faith, we practice the co-creation of this special wealth, and in our wider communities, we also have opportunities to make valuable investments that can bring us out of a friendship recession.

So may it be,  
In the spirit of friendship,  
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #299 Make Channels for the Streams of Love**

Words: From Richard Chenevix Trench, 1807-1886

Music: American folk melody, arr. by Annabel Morris Buchanan, 1889-1983, © 1938, renewed 1966 J. Fischer & Bros. Co., harmony by Charles H. Webb, 1933- , © 1989 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.

LAND OF REST

**Hymn #18 What Wondrous Love**

Words: American folk hymn

~)-| New Words by Connie Campbell Hart, 1929- © 1992 UUA

Melody: Melody from *The Southern Harmony*, 1835

WONDROUS LOVE

**Closing #108 My Life Flows On in Endless Song**

Words: Traditional, Verse 3 by Doris Plenn

Music: Robert Lowry, 1826-1899

SINGING