

United or Untied?

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Bauman – the title of his book is “Liquid Love” a phrase he used to describe human relationships in the culture we now live in. Relationships are fluid and shifting, temporary.

We assume that a person now will have several different employers during their lifetime, live in several different houses and cities,

People will declare themselves to be “in love until the end of time” with several different people at different times of their lives (only those who marry their childhood sweethearts are the exception).

Even that relationship which you did not choose – your family of origin – we do not think it at all odd that we would see different stages and states of that relationship. Some examples, we understand wise parenting to be done in stages. To be a parent of an infant requires one sort of relationship to the child, childhood another, all the way through teen-parenting and being the parent of adult children.

People belong to different churches, or follow different religious paths, at various stages of their lives.

None of this is considered strange, or insincere, or that the relationships we declare on Monday and abandon on Friday are not sincere and honest at the time we declared them.

I am not making a judgment – this is just how our culture is working at this point in history. Our relationships are temporary, shifting, fluid in that they flow from one shape to another.

Is it any wonder that people want community, want relationships, want friends and partners.

When new people come to us these days, almost with exception they say that what they are looking for is a “religious, or spiritual, community”. They define and evaluate churches, not by their beliefs, but by the quality of the community they have fostered.

Somehow in this era of shifting, fluid and ever-changing relationships, they feel a need for community, a group of people who care for each other, who work together to do good works in the world, to surround the children with lots of adults who are supportive and encouraging, and with whom they can worship, re-committing themselves to their highest understandings.

Yes, indeed there is a deep hunger for community these days.

Which is why churches, religious institutions of all kinds, civic organizations, like Rotary and Kiwanis, organized political parties, bowling leagues, and neighborhood organizations, PTA’s are all busting at the seams, growing by leaps and bounds.

But they are not. Everyone wants community, and yet more and more people are leading very privatized lives, with fewer and fewer community outlets every year.

A similar fact is that people say that they want to be in a romantic love relationship, fewer people in surveys identify themselves as being in a relationship than ever before. In fact, the opposite is true. More people than ever describe themselves as being single.

Apparently, we want to be in love, just not with any of the people we know. We want to be a part of a community, just not the ones around us.

I would guess that many people would want to dedicate their life to some great cause to make the world a better place, except that there doesn't seem to be any great causes around.

Do you see the contradiction that I am getting at?

We want to live United, but seem to be choosing to live Untied? Modern people, in this world of liquid love, fluid relationships appear to be commitment-phobes.

Zygmunt Bauman noticed this as a clue. He says to take a look at the columns of relationship advice in newspapers and magazines. They are the place where lonely people go for advice. So I started noticing more and more what was in the relationship advice column in G magazine, which comes with the Boston Globe. And most of advice is not about how to get into a relationship. It is about making the decision about whether to get out of a relationship. What are the signs that your loved one is controlling and potentially dangerous? What are the signs that your new boyfriend is actually married? What are the signs that your new boyfriend is really gay? What are the signs that she is cheating on you, that she will never break free of her mother? What are the danger signs in your relationship?

The obvious point. There are always potential dangers in a relationship. After all, any relationship, or any commitment to a community, or a cause, is a leap into the unknown. Both you and whoever you are committing to are changing and are an unknown future.

So there are reasonable fears about every sort of commitment to a person, to a community and to a cause.

And so when you make a commitment to a person, to a community, or to a cause, choosing to live united rather than untied, you have to overcome two obstacles.

One is the recognition that each of us is an unreliable commitment maker. I see this all the time with young people who are getting married. On the one hand, they want, desperately and sincerely want, to say that "I will love you forever, until the end of time, until the stars fall from the skies, under the mountains crumble into the sea." And on the other hand, everything we know about people, and maybe even our parents, is that perfectly ordinary, good and decent people fall out of love and end their marriages, often for the better. On your wedding day, you have no idea whether that is going to be you or not. So how can you make that commitment?

The other obstacle is this: people fear the uncontrolled and unpredictable nature of commitments. That boyfriend may be a stalker. That religious movement may be a cult. That church may end up asking you for a lot of money, or asking for a lot of your time. When Sue and I joined a Unitarian Church long ago in 1989, we made a promise to ourselves that we would not let ourselves become over-committed, over-busy and over-extended.

People do not go in through the front door, unless they can see where the emergency exit is.

The more serious the commitment, the more important it is to know that it is revocable.

A UU religious educator asked me once why it was that a family will commit to be at every practice and every game for a soccer season, but will not make the commitment to come to Sunday school every week. Is soccer that much more important?

I think it is because soccer is so much less important. It's time limited, it's a finite commitment and promised really so little: learn how to play a game better, get some exercise, get some experience in teamwork and sportsmanship.

Church is a bigger and more profound commitment, so it should be entered into with more caution and care. It's an open-ended commitment that might transform one's whole life.

Up until now, I think that I have been laying out a fairly conventional understanding of our hungry yet skittish culture. How we are reluctant to commit ourselves to the very things that we are hungry for: community, relationships, causes.

But what is at the root?

I am going to break with what I think is the conventional wisdom about this. Many of my colleagues in the ministry and in the churches diagnose the problem as an excess of individualism.

They say that people don't commit to the communities, the persons, the social purposes because at heart they are lazy, and preoccupied with their own private pleasures. That's the theory. Folks are shallow and prefer to have superficial relationships over the Internet and Facebook, than engage in the deep communication of face to face relationship. They say people prefer the disposable, the commercial and the trivial. They say. But mostly, they say that we prefer the individual, the private and the personal. We are untied, because we want to be untied and it comes from the shallowness of our culture and the deficiencies of our souls.

Well, I don't agree. Let me repeat: I don't agree.

I believe that the obstacle to community is not too much individualism, but not enough.

And when I say that, I believe that I am standing squarely in the religious tradition of liberal religion, which is different than almost every other religious tradition the world has ever seen.

Let me break it down for you.

Why are we afraid to commitment? Because we know that there are dangers in commitments and we are afraid that we will not be able to manage ourselves in response to those dangers.

Take for example, joining a church. The danger that many people fear is that they will lose themselves in the church life. They will be asked for money all the time, and they will not know how to say no. They will be asked to volunteer their time and they will not know how to say, sorry I am busy. They will lose themselves and their own judgment in the attractions of a charismatic leader. Join the church and next thing you know, you're in Jonestown.

What is this? It is a lack of self-possession, a lack of confidence in the self to say yes and to say no, to manage one's own life. It is a fear of losing oneself, instead of having the confidence to possess one's self. Lacking self-possession, a person fears the loss of self-determination in any commitment serious enough to change one's life, even for the better.

It is because we fear that we lack self-differentiation, or self-possession, that we fear commitment. It is the suspicion that we are not, nor can we be in control of our lives that we fear commitment. As a result we go through life as nervous as a recovering alcoholic at a cocktail party. We choose to be untied, because being untied is too dangerous.

Almost every religious tradition in the world takes a highly suspicious view of the self. Conquer the self. Diminish the self. Overcome the self. Ignore the self. Submit the self to the church, to the religious order, to God. Let Go and Let God. Love the fact that you are not in control. This is their message.

Liberal religion has been based on the understanding that it is only the free mind, the mind in possession of itself that can make real and enthusiastic and powerful commitments. Let us remember what is meant by self-differentiation: it is the ability to know and act upon the fact that you are different than others, while maintaining the ability to be in relationship with others. When you are self-differentiated, you can be friends and love people with whom you disagree. When you are self-differentiated, you can disagree with the people whom you love, without feeling guilty or disloyal.

In a world in which everything is changing, being self-differentiated, having a stronger self, not a weaker self, is the only way to be committed to others.

You have to have a powerful self to join in, to dedicate yourself, and to be part of a free community, to sustain community in spite of all the risks.

When James talks about the law of liberty as being the condition in which each of us can be doers of the word, I believe that this is what he is talking about.

It is in the condition of freedom and liberty that souls grow into their strength and power. And strong and powerful souls make the kinds of commitments that change lives, create communities and save worlds. Freedom calls us into bravery.

It is the purpose of this community to make you brave in liberty, and thus true to yourself.

Here in this free religious community, we learn to hear religious ideas different than our own, while calling upon us to deepen our faith. We learn how to respond creatively to people who are different than us by practicing creative response to ideas different than our own.

Let us end with a prayer: O God, let your face shine upon each of us, and remind us that we are each made in your image, and endowed by you with our uniqueness and individuality and with the freedom to choose our own response to this ever-changing world. Grant us such strength as to give ourselves in love without reservation, to unite with others in common purpose and to devote ourselves to the service of others. In the name of all your holy ones, we pray. Amen.