

**“The Church and Social Networking”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania**  
**June 20, 2010 • Rev. Judy Welles, Rev. Duane Fickeisen**

**Opening Words**

**Rev. Duane Fickeisen**

This morning we'll explore the role of social media — the internet's means of linking people up with each other in groups — and whether and how they might enhance (or detract from) experiences of friendship, connection, intimacy, and community.

These systems have gone viral, with exponential growth in participation. They permit users to link up with “friends” and post short messages, photos, invitations to events, and just about anything they want others to know about them. Typically these are narrowcast messages — sent out to your whole list of friends or a subset of it — but visible to many people at the same time. Most of the time friends can respond with a comment, which is likewise widely shared — even among their friends whom you may never know.

I use Facebook. I resisted it for months, but finally gave in. I have over 160 friends (which I understand is a paltry number), and have reconnected, at least superficially, with people I have not seen in 25 years. My Facebook friends include family, colleagues, borough officials, actual friends, and members of the congregation, including several teens, some of whom have apparently forgotten that their minister is reading their posts.

It has helped me keep up on the parts of their personal news that they choose to share, and been a good source of interesting diversion. And it's a readily available diversion, a handy support for procrastination, and a lure into the cyberworld. Potentially addictive.

Most users apparently don't pay much attention to privacy settings, but even if they do, they would be wise to treat posting as if they were putting a notice up in the town square. One that would never go away and could come back years or decades later to haunt you, long after it has scrolled off the news feed hours after you posted it.

Despite the drawbacks, perhaps social media can serve to facilitate connection and community. But it is a tool, and like most tools, can be abused and misused. Let's explore some of the ways to avoid the pitfalls and optimize the benefits.

**Reading**

“May I Be No One's Enemy”

*Eusebius (ancient Greek scholar, date unknown)*

May I be no one's enemy and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides.

May I wish for every person's happiness and envy none.

May I never rejoice in the till fortune of one who has wronged me.

May I, to the extent of my power, give needful help to all who are in want.

May I never fail a friend.

May I respect myself.

May I always keep tame that which rages within me.

May I accustom myself to be gentle and never be angry with others because of circumstances.

May I know good people and follow in their footsteps.

## **Reading**

“The Line of Grace”

*Van Jones*

*Van Jones is an environmental advocate, civil rights activist and attorney who spoke two years ago at the UU General Assembly and electrified the place! In March 2009 he was appointed by President Obama to a position at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Four months later he became embroiled in a controversy over his youthful political activities, most of which were discovered through Internet searches. Jones resigned from the position in early September, 2009 to save the administration further embarrassment. This is what he said in an on-line interview a few months after his resignation:*

It used to be, as you went through these stages in your life, you could go to the next town and start over. The only person you were accountable to besides yourself was, if you were a person of faith, God. The line of grace was vertical, between you and your creator. Now, in this age of YouTube and Google, all of us are leaving digital bread crumbs behind of the person we used to be. Anything you do or say, some silly thing you did at a college party if somebody had a cell-phone camera, can be seen by everybody, forever. You can know more than you ever wanted to know about pretty much anybody.

It requires more wisdom of society. The line of grace now has to be horizontal. We have to learn how to forgive each other and extend a certain amount of empathy as we all grow up in front of each other. At some point, there'll be enough people who have had these "gotcha" experiences, and we'll hit a tipping point. We'll have a different level of tolerance. But it's too early. We're still too new to this, we don't have the language, customs, and rituals to be able to handle all this stupid stuff we can learn about each other.<sup>1</sup>

*This gives new meaning to the lines from Eusebius that Duane read earlier: “May I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides...”*

## **Sermon**

The Church and Social Networking

**Rev. Judy Welles**

If you had been around in the 1450's when Herr Gutenberg invented his printing press, you might have been alarmed and worried about what unwelcome changes this new invention might cause in your relationship with your church. After all, when Herr Gutenberg printed the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.grist.org/article/2010-03-25-van-jones-i-feel-like-im-just-getting-started/>

Bible, he made that holy book inexpensive and accessible to anyone who could read, whereas up until then it had been a sacred text reserved only for the hands and hearts of the learned clergy.

And if I had been there, I might have quoted Ecclesiastes and said “There is nothing new under the sun.” (Although of course I would actually have said it in Latin, since the Bible hadn’t been translated yet.)

In hindsight, it clearly was progress. At the time, who knows how many doubters and nay-sayers reacted with alarm to this new development in human communications? Throughout human history, established practices have been superseded over and over and over again by technological advances which have simultaneously threatened the *status quo* and improved the quality of human life. It’s understandable that such advances have been greeted with mixed responses.

We’ve seen a lot of this just in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the cinema would replace live theater, vinyl recordings and the radio would replace live concerts, paperback books would destroy the publishing industry, the Internet and Kindle would replace books altogether. And so on and so on.

And here we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with such a dazzling array of electronic communications devices available to us that it’s difficult even to grasp what all the options are.

To say the least, I am not an early adapter to technological innovation. Ask my husband how loudly I complain when I have to install a software upgrade. It’s even worse when I have to buy a whole new computer because my old one can’t handle the newest, trendiest software. “Why do I have to replace this?” I wail. “It’s perfectly good.” For the record, I use a paper and pencil to keep track of my calendar, and I can go weeks without even remembering that I own a cell phone.

So I’m not here this morning to urge you all to step up your tecchie know-how by joining Facebook or opening a Twitter account. These kinds of decisions are deeply personal.

However, I am here to help us all remember that nothing stays the same; things are always changing. Despite Ecclesiastes’ cynical commentary that there is no new thing under the sun, new developments are popping up faster and faster. If we Unitarian Universalists want to be around and viable as a 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> century religion, we need to at least know what our options are in the ways we might adapt to the future, and make wise decisions about whether and how to use them.

Now I’m aware that there are people here this morning who don’t use Facebook and never will. We have friends and members who don’t even have computers and are not likely to be interested in the esoteric ins and outs of friending and status updates and sudden changes in one’s profile information. I’m only mildly interested in those things myself.

What I am interested in is making my church as accessible as possible to the widest possible range of people who might check us out if they knew we existed, and that means keeping up (to some degree) with the ways that technology can serve our mission to transform lives and care for the world.

For the most part, I rely on my husband Duane and our Music Director David to make a path for me through the jungle of technological terms and choices that frequently confront me in

my professional life. A tecchie I am not. But I did get onto Facebook a long time before Duane did, which I figure makes me the expert in our family.

It's tempting to think that because I'm an extravert looking to connect, while Duane is an introvert looking to protect his privacy, I was the one who was most naturally drawn to this social networking phenomenon. But it's not that simple. Duane has reminded me that tools like e-mail and Facebook often are well-suited to introverts, who want some time to think things over privately before having to make a reply — a luxury not available in a face-to-face conversation or a phone call. And David, also an introvert like Duane, found Facebook long before I did and figured out how to use it in a sophisticated and nuanced way that lets him control who sees what information about him and keeps his privacy boundaries pretty much intact.

And this is one of the important points that I want to make this morning: as a participant in social networking, you can control how you use it and how far to go with it. I sometimes hear people express concern that a site like Facebook will take over their lives and they'd better give it a wide berth for their own good. But the last I knew, human beings still could exercise free will, and we can still control the words our fingers type and how much information about ourselves we give out; we can still turn off the computer and find something else to do long before Facebook sucks our brains right out through our eyeballs, as a friend of mine once complained.

Now before I go any farther in my enthusiasm about Facebook (which is admittedly the only social networking site I'm familiar with, so I probably gave this sermon the wrong title), I need to explain a little bit about how it works and what it does.

When you join Facebook, you fill out a page of information about yourself called your profile. You can say as much or as little as you wish; you can post a photograph or you can let Facebook give you one of those vague, genderless silhouettes that reveals absolutely nothing. If you state what city you live near, where you went to high school or college, your political or religious affiliations or your hobbies, Facebook can do at least two things with that information. It can suggest others who are already on Facebook whom you might know and want to "friend," (more about that in a minute), and it can sell your information to advertisers whose products you might buy.

Yes, the ads are a nuisance when they pop up on your screen, but remember free will? You can ignore them.

Thanks to Facebook, the word "friend" has now become a verb. Friending someone gives them some access (you can control how much) to the material that you post, and allows you to see what they post and (if they allow it) how their friends comment about their posts. These posts are prompted by a dialogue box with the permanent question "What's on your mind?" And believe me, people will definitely write what's on their minds. Everything from "I'm having a hard day" to persuasive political arguments to important personal news ("the surgery went fine and I'm home now") to links which will take you to Internet sites of interest to your friends.

Going to your home page (which is different from your profile) is like strolling down to the center of your little town on a beautiful summer evening to see what everyone is up to. You can see the latest posts of all your friends — and depending on how many friends you have and how long it's been since you last checked in, there could be a LOT of interesting news and information there. Your friends want you to know what's on their minds. Facebook also makes it

possible to send private messages that no one else can see, so that it's possible to start a conversation in public — at the center of town, so to speak — and then continue it as you both go off to sit somewhere by yourselves.

Of course this issue of Facebook friends raises the obvious question “Are Facebook friends *real* friends?” That's sort of like asking “How long is a piece of string?” The answer can only be “That depends.”

Some Facebook friendships are superficial. A girl I used to walk to school with in second grade found me on Facebook and asked to be my friend. One can always say no by ignoring the request, but I said yes because I was curious about what had ever happened to her. We had a brief exchange of childhood birthday party photographs and that was about it. I don't consider her a “real” friend, though we might be if we lived near each other, as I've been pleased to see that we share political views and a devotion to our grandchildren.

And of course I am Facebook friends with some “real” friends as well, people I've known for years, see often, and care for deeply. Facebook neither creates nor maintains our friendship, but it allows us a quick way to share simple news or just know what's going on. Heck, I'm Facebook friends with Duane and my own daughters, and even though they are the people closest to my heart, our connection there is one more thread that weaves us close in a thousand little ways. Yes, I do sometimes learn what's on Duane's mind from his Facebook page before he gets around to telling me in person. And that's fine.

Blogger Lisa Reichelt has named this experience *ambient intimacy*. “Ambient intimacy,” she writes, is about “being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

When I was considering whether to join Facebook, I gave a lot of thought to whose friendship requests I would accept. Some of my colleagues use Facebook only for their personal and private enjoyment, and they don't friend anyone in their churches. But I soon figured out that Facebook is a very public place, and you can't control who the friends of your friends are and what they might see. So I decided that I'd friend anyone from UUCV who asked me, and if I learned that a UUCV'er was on Facebook, I would ask to friend them. As a result, I have 71 Facebook friends from UUCV, some of whom are kids in the congregation (and as Duane commented, it's probably just as well that they have forgotten that their ministers are looking over their shoulders.)

Now here's where I can make the argument that social networking is good for the church, because it's one of the places where I actually engage in ministry. And let me emphasize ***ONE of the places***, because the kind of interaction that's possible is time-limited and superficial. But it does allow me to stay connected with 71 of you quickly and easily. And there's more. If one of our kids posts a disturbing message, I can call him or his parents and ask what's going on and whether they want to talk. It's also the place I go when a newsletter deadline looms and I'm looking for material for “All in the UUCV Family;” how else would I have learned about Hailey Freeman's soccer victory?

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Christian Century*, June 30, 2009 “The church on Facebook: why we need virtual community,” p. 23

Of course Facebook has its limitations. Just yesterday, one of my UU colleagues wrote on her Facebook page “After learning about one person's death and one person's divorce in one sitting via Facebook, I'm wondering: How best can the nature and limitations of social networking authentically & effectively support human caring? ...How best can social media... ease hurt and support hope? More specifically: how do you [express] psychospiritual content that often cannot be done justice bounded within 140 characters? As we increasingly relate thru social media, how do we recognize and address this limitation of social media?” I replied, “Remember that Facebook is a place for learning news but it doesn't stop there. Now that you know this news, you can reply appropriately, anything from a 140-character message to a phone call or a visit. Facebook is just a starting place, and a convenient one at that.”

I also think there's a bigger question here than whether and how Facebook can help us within the present context of the church to offer support and caring to one another. The pace of technological change invites us — nay, insists that we creatively re-imagine what church might look like altogether in the coming decades. In the same article in *Christian Century* where I learned about ambient intimacy, I found this paragraph that *really* got my attention:

...for many in our society, church has fallen off the to-do list entirely. Not only is that hour on Sunday morning seen as one more long commute in a week of long commutes, but the traditional church... is often experienced as a “cultural commute” as well. For many, perhaps especially in the under-30 crowd, walking into a church on a Sunday morning is the equivalent of entering a foreign country in which you don't speak the language or know any of the customs. It may be a nice place to visit, but you really wouldn't want to live there.<sup>3</sup>

And we really do want people to live here, don't we? At least spiritually live here? I deeply, firmly, passionately believe that the world would be a much better place if there were a lot more Unitarian Universalists in it. So I feel called to explore how I (and you and all of us) might make that happen. What kind of outreach will we need for the people who are 15 or 20 years old today, and in ten years (or for that matter, right this minute) might be looking for a religious community where they feel welcome, comfortable, and understood? How can we use technology to provide that outreach?

With Facebook, some of the technology is already right at our fingertips, and the people who might benefit from it are not limited to those under 30. Just yesterday I received a message from someone who is a charter member of this congregation but rarely attends any more. It's been years since I've actually seen him. But Facebook has allowed us to have a little bit of contact — enough to remind him that we care about him and that interesting things are going on around here. This is what he said to me on Facebook yesterday (which I repeat here with his express permission):

Getting on Facebook and finding people from UUCV sending friend requests made it easy for me to explore something that I have had trouble committing to [and] participating in, yet could not completely leave. I have been on the border for years, never really committed to church. I think this is a way to at least start to actually look at myself and evaluate what to do and how to do it before I just end

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

up back in church for a few Sundays then leave again. I don't know enough about Facebook to understand its potential, but I think there is something more there. I would like to feel you could be committed and active in different kinds of ways.

I would like to feel that way myself — that there are different kinds of ways to be committed and active at UUCV without necessarily making the weekly commute on Sunday mornings. I would never advocate that we eliminate Small Group Ministries or worship services or the Youth Group or Circle Suppers or all of the ways we now have to connect face to face with one another. We don't have to take anything away — but what can we add? How can we make it attractive for people to affiliate with us and call themselves Unitarian Universalists using technologies perhaps still yet to be developed?

I think it starts with an openness to the possible. Aren't Duane and I always saying "Revelation is not sealed"? New knowledge is always coming toward us, new and creative ideas are always arising and then taking concrete form in our lives. So we begin by having minds open to possibility, welcoming change, curious about the whole future range from the feasible to the unlikely.

Revelation is not sealed. We don't necessarily know what comes next, but I'm optimistic that it will be interesting and useful, and that we will find ways to benefit from whatever wonders the world shall witness.

### **Closing Words**

"Maybe Someday..."

*Kari Henley*

Maybe someday this will all blow over when we learn how to become telepathic. Then we can ditch all these terminals, beeping phones and complex devices and just return to the Oneness. We will simply know and trust that we are not alone and won't have to prove it over and over again.