

What If We Were Faithbook Friends Instead?  
Reimagining Social Media  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

There, at the garden verge, I will pull you up in hope again  
No more second thoughts will crowd you out of your desire  
to be loved...not touched  
to be blameless and ecstatic again  
This is all there is  
No knowledge is too much to bear in the end

—Jonatha Brooke, Charming

**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, so bold or so bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the darkness and the light. Welcome to the open and to the broken ones among us, to the blissfully imperfect souls who are just like you and just like me, blessed and beloved, held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.”

“I’m trying to put this as delicately as I can,” said the young doctor. He was choosing his words carefully. He said, “How do I know that you won’t kill me in my sleep?” He was trying to stay beyond the reach of the long arm of the law. He was on the run. He was laying low. He was ‘on the lamb,’ as they say. He was a stow-away on the captain’s ship.

So, the captain replied to the doctor, the young man who had stolen on to his vessel. He responded by saying, “You don’t know me, son. So, let me explain this to you once. If I ever kill you, you’ll be awake. You’ll be facing me and you’ll be armed.” As a rule, as a matter of principle, the captain was respectful of his adversaries. He believed in the integrity of the good and honest fight. He was committed to that, given to that, led forward by it in life. It was a means by which his life had meaning.

It was different for the young doctor. The nature of the “good fight” was not the same. For the doctor, the “good fight” had nothing to with an adversary. He wasn’t committed or given or led forward by conflict with another human being. His mortal enemy wasn’t a person. It was mortality, itself. The doctor wanted to save all people from injury, infirmity and pain. He was a healer. He wanted to rescue his every patient from the effects of what the captain was calling “a good and honest fight.”

The captain had been a soldier. He served for many years. He stood in harm’s way, impassioned. He risked his life and he did that by choice. He had trained for it. He was good at it. He was comfortable with weapons, skilled in combat and

defensive strategy. He was very different than the doctor.

The doctor was a man of science. He was a master of the arts of medicine. He knew nothing and cared nothing about the arts of war. He disdained them, actually. And so, the captain's beliefs were lost on him. The doctor couldn't appreciate what the captain was saying. He didn't understand the values for which the captain was fighting. Confounded, the doctor responded to the captain's explanation about why he would not be killed as he slept. After being 'assured' that if it ever were to come to a killing confrontation, both men would be wide awake and armed. It wasn't comforting. So, he asked, sardonically, "Are you always this sentimental?"

"I had a good day," the captain replied, newly pleased with himself. He was smiling slightly. He was leaning back in his chair.

The captain's reply only further confounded the doctor. They were different men. The doctor just couldn't believe what the captain was saying. So, he questioned the captain about the meaning of his words, about the very idea of "a good day." Because the doctor had been with him that day and that day had not seemed so good to him. He said, "You had [military forces chasing you. You had to outrun] criminals and savages. Half of the people on [your] ship have been shot or wounded (including yourself) and you are harboring known fugitives." With all of this, the doctor thought to himself, how could anyone was having a "good day"? The young doctor just didn't understand.

The captain did. Maybe it was the advantage of his years but the captain saw things differently. In the midst of misfortune, danger and great uncertainty, he kept his cool. He kept his weather eye on the positive. He met the doctor's confusion with two clear thoughts: "We're still [sailing...and] that's enough."

That is the final passage of the pilot episode of a television show called *Firefly*. When I shared this passage with a friend and colleague, she said that it reminded her of the psalmist in the Bible. The psalmists remind us that, in the presence of grace, we are born away on angel's wings. We are lifted up spirit and by true and fearless love. Psalm 91 reads as follows:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress  
my God in whom I trust"  
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;  
he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler

Under wing, we will find refuge. We will find solace and protection. This is what the psalm is telling us. Another translation of this passage reads:

He will cover you with his feathers  
and under his wings you will find refuge,  
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.  
You will not fear the terror of night

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nor the arrow that flies by day  
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness  
nor the plague that destroys [in the lightness]

The two translations are essentially the same. They use different words to describe the same experience—the findings of refuge, solace and spiritual protection. The same text translates into English as “pinions” in the first example and translates as “feathers” in the second. The pinion is “the outer part of a bird's wing” or the flight feathers. It's a more specific term but the poetic gesture is the same. In both versions, we are born away from suffering. We are lifted up by grace.

Similarly, the same text translates as “buckler” in the first example and translates as “rampart” in the second. These are different things. A “buckler” is a small hand-held shield (often made of metal) and a “rampart” is the protective, outer wall of an ancient castle. Obviously, a rampart is not hand-held. Here, the two translations use different words to describe very different things and still, somehow, the poetic gesture more or less remains the same. We are divinely protected, kept safe in ways both great and small.

In the opening passage from *Firefly*, the difference and dissonance between the doctor and the captain was obvious. They experienced life very differently. They each saw in life very different things. Their perspectives were dissimilar. Their points of view were not the same. Their respective worldviews were clashing and crashing and yet, they found peace with one another. Over time and properly nurtured, they found refuge, solace and protection. By grace, by luck, by love, they were born away on angel's wings and lifted up.

What does all of this mean for Unitarian Universalists and for the peculiar faith that is our inheritance? Ours is a non-dogmatic tradition that goes back hundreds of years. This means that there is no religious litmus test that functions as a cost of admission. Unitarian Universalism does not require confessions of denominational faith. Many different religious paths lead us to places like North Chapel. Many roads lead to where we stand right now. We are the current carriers of a faith that is centuries-long in the making and is ours to make today, preparing the good way forward for tomorrow.

At Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships and meeting houses all across the country and around the world, this is the case. Ours is a living faith and a living tradition. It lives in us. It lives in me and it lives in you. This is why the hymnal is named as it is. And this unifies us...even though we all find our own ways to holy. Guided by the Christianity, the Catholicism, the Judaism, the Buddhism, the agnosticism, the paganism and even the atheism of our upbringings...traveling from the churches and the temples and the synagogues and the mosque of our youth and traveling even from nature (the church of the great outdoors), we gather together as a people. I find that beautiful...and revolutionary. Ours is a truly revolutionary love. We're not alone in that but we sure do do it our own way!

I once met a man in church. This was back in North Carolina. He said that he had formerly been a River Bend Baptist. He said that that was what he was before he got into Unitarian Universalism. I had never heard of the River Bend Baptists but

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I was new to North Carolina. I had no shame in just asking him about the history of that tradition. “What is a River Bend Baptist?” I asked him plainly.

He smiled at me. He made a casting gesture and pretended that he was trying to catch a fish. The pin dropped. He hadn’t gone to church formally. He just went fishing on Sunday morning. I liked that guy. I don’t remember his name but I remember that I liked him.

We use very different paths in life and we arrive at the same place sometimes and that’s the richness of it. There’s not right way to enter in. So it is that we are gathered here, together, now...in conflict and in consensus. Held whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. I say that all the time and I mean it each time I say it. And it’s fresh, even though I say it ritually, over and over again.

I love the word, consensus. It has deep meaning for me. The word consensus is defined as agreement but is much more than that. Consensus is a process of egalitarian decision-making. A lovely explanation is as follows:

[Consensus] does not mean unanimity. Nor does it mean voting where choice is determined by the majority [over] the minority. Majority voting...can make controversial decisions quicker but that says nothing to the wisdom or the morality of the decision. Where the majority rules, the majority [seems] infallible and the minority’s dissent is steamrolled and [made to seem] irrelevant. The minority is forced to go along with whatever is decided upon, no matter how it affects them or contradicts their convictions.

Consensus rejects dualistic, either/or choices and opens itself to infinite possibilities. Consensus is based on the principle that every voice is worth hearing and every concern is justified.

This rhymes with the first principle of Unitarian Universalism—the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Continuing...

[Consensus] is more than chasing compromise and finding a solution that everyone can live with. It is a process of finding creative solutions, better than the original proposal. Ideas build one upon the next, generating new ideas until the best decision emerges.

Consensus done right, creates an atmosphere in which conflict is desirable, encouraged, supported and resolved cooperatively...with respect and creativity, rather than avoiding, dismissing, diminishing or denying the inevitable.

[Lastly,] Consensus also recognizes that decisions are not an end in themselves. Decision-making is a process—from proposal to actual implementation. For cultures and groups that value consent and cooperation rather than coercion to follow through, consensus has been the practice.

I enjoy this explanation. I like that it’s peaceful and egalitarian. I like that it’s accessible, that it applies to both doctor and captain alike. It is useful to everyone. It offers a pathway out of narrow thinking. It lets the mind to become more free and more creative. It helps us to imagine something better. It gives the soul the time and the protection that it needs to flower fuller into a world that’s all brand new.

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Consensus means that we get to get deep about many things in life—real and meaningful things. When we don't get deep enough, we end up getting ourselves in some trouble. So, we need to get deep and consensus gets us there. Talking with one another gets us there. LISTENING to one another... Being silent with one another gets us there. In these ways, we can get deep about how we live and how we love in life. We can get deep about our ways of living, about how we justly organize our economies. When we don't do this, our economies begin to organize us—the commercial economy, the cultural economy, the moral economy... In many ways, these economies already sort us out. They already organize us and we need to be mindful of this...because on their own, they will not organize us—body and soul—for the common good. On their own, they can be selfish and irresponsible. They can foster fantastic wealth and desperate impoverishment.

Oftentimes, we are asked—we, the people—we are asked to be compassionate. We are expected to be compassionate, to be generous with our treasure... We are expected to give. We are asked to be charitable, to be mindful of those who are less fortunate in life. But when our economies become unwieldy, they cannot be tempered by charity. Individual compassion is not enough and can never be enough. It's not supposed to be...because some issues are so deep and so serious that they are not best addressed by tending the individual leaves and lower branches of the tree. Doing do—however fervently and however passionately and however earnestly—doesn't get us to the root of the problem. It only distracts our efforts and leaves us nowhere closer to the truth.

Individual compassion is not the tool that is useful for solving systemic problems. It's not supposed to be. Collective compassion is the tool we that we need for this and consensus gets us there. Collective compassion is true compassion and Martin Luther King reminds us of this He reminds us that true compassion is not charity. King said that...

True compassion is more than flinging a coin at a beggar; [true compassion] comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars is broken and is in need of restructuring.

That's where we were back then, back in the early 1960s. That's where we were back then and it's largely where we still are today. We've been stagnant...and it drives us all a little crazy sometimes. And we forget about the basic values of equity, equanimity and justice.

It's gotten worse in the past few years and we are beginning to understand why. Last Sunday, we talked about the Facebook whistle-blower, the courageous woman who has created such a stir...the one who addressed Congress earlier this month by saying,

My name is Frances Haugen. I used to work at Facebook. ...I think Facebook has the potential to bring out the best in us. But I'm here today because I believe Facebook's products harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy.

Haugen put a lot of things in motion and others have now joined the ranks.

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...here's what's insidious...about how [Facebook and other social media platforms] earn their revenues. They are collecting and extracting our personal demographic data...and they're actually targeting us...targeted disinformation...targeted hate...

I don't know that most people understand that we are the product on Facebook. They're selling us to their advertisers. And so, without even truly understanding how this works, we're being used...

Passively and unwittingly, we become the sellable product of our own need to connect with one another. Actively and unwillingly, we are encouraged to become involved in the hate-for-profit/lie-for-profit online business model that is doing so much damage to the common good.

Our common sense is weakened by algorithmic formulas. The common ground beneath our feet has shifted. The common good is disconnected from the public interest these and this used to never be the case. When we talk about our common sense, the common ground or the common good in the context of partisan politics, we just get lost. So few things are holding us together these days. We race to worthless compromises and call it a good day much too often. We commonly throw value and throw meaning by the wayside. We mire down the wildest eye of American inspiration logic of lowest common denominators. We've forgotten how to be the greater fool.

The greater fool is punished, is banished by social media these days. Uncommon or unpopular ideas get crushed online, even when those ideas—and perhaps especially when those ideas—suggest the good and peaceful way forward. Business is booming when we're all enraged.

Anger is better for business these days so, of course, anger it is. And it is this way consciously and intentionally, by choice and design. The architect set the table online and we eat up what they prepare by paying attention. In the online business world, there's a name for it. They call it eyeball hours. Anger, outrage and spectacle are better at catching our attention and holding it captive until we buy something. They keep us watching...but they distort the nature of the world in which we live. As whistleblower Francis Haugen explains, we pay the consequences of this.

Social media platforms like Facebook are making conscious choices in user-specific ways. Social media [and this I quote],  
...is optimizing for content that gets engagement or reaction. But its own research is showing that content that is hateful, that is divisive, that is polarizing... [Its own research is showing that] it's easier to inspire people to anger than it is to other emotions.

Of course, they are. Social media is an extractive commercial enterprise. That's why it's "free"? Why is this surprising us?

Mark Zuckerberg and his project are on trial these days but not because of what they have done. False advertisers, bad politicians and sometimes mediocre ministers have been doing this from time immemorial but there are two major differences. Rarely have advertisers, politicians and ministers of any stripe held the

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kind of sway that social media has claimed on our hearts and minds. And never before has a private company scanned the digital landscape of the public mind. Mark Zuckerberg cannot truly know what he is doing because it's never been done before.

The trials of Mark Zuckerberg, Francis Haugen and Facebook—the trials of social media in writ large—are not about justice in the main. They are not about the relative guilt and innocence of individuals or even whole companies. These are not legal trials but rather, they are spiritual ones.

Business practice in this kind of an economy goes after the jugular, every time. What we receive as American culture is largely based on the success of this model. The problem is that this model is based on lowest common denominators. It is highly dismissive of highest human values—values of equity, equanimity and justice...values of integrity and mutual respect. In these values, we can all find refuge, solace and spiritual protection. We can easily restore what is torn away from us right now...in the blink of an eye.

I'm not great fan of Mark Zuckerberg but he is not the enemy here. At least part of the enemy is in me and is my own loneliness, my own desire to be known and, of course, my own desire to be loved. I want to be loved. That's part of why I have 2,161 Facebook friends at present, most of whom I do not know well at all.

If we decided to, we could put social media on the witness stand and go all Perry Mason on it—pelting it with penetrating questions and forcing it to confess its sins. We could find social media guilty and send it all to prison. We can lock it up and throw away the key if we so choose, if that becomes the voice of the majority. We could throw social media to the lions. It would make for a brilliant spectacular... but we would be forced to pretend that we were not judging ourselves as well.

I'm disappointed with the state of Facebook—disappointed with the state of commercial culture in general—but I don't think that it's useful for social media to ask the question of us: “How do I know that you won't kill me in my sleep?”

The psalmists speak about the feather wings of our protection. They speak about solace, about refuge and they speak to us of peace. They did not vote. It wasn't “to the victors go the spoils.” They did not depend on a business model. They sang and they danced and they prayed...and then, they made choices together, consensually, for the benefit of all. As Faithbook friends not Facebook friends, in beloved community which is, I believe, the original social media, we can soften into the challenges that are before us. Come what may. And...

There, at the garden verge, I will pull you up in hope again  
No more second thoughts will crowd you out of your desire  
to be loved...not touched  
to be blameless and ecstatic again  
This is all there is  
No knowledge is too much to bear in the end

—Jonatha Brooke, Charming

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

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