

Validation
Jeffrey Holmes
January 30, 2022

Before I begin my presentation – and I call it a presentation instead of a sermon which I relegate to someone with a divinity degree or some other suitable qualification – I would like to thank the Worship and Music Committee for allowing me to speak this morning. I say this because over the 30 years that I have been involved with this church, I have given about 20 presentations, and not once have I been honored with the presence of our stupendous choir. Up to now, Sue has played flawlessly the standard two hymns, or in her absence, an inferior substitute has taken to the keyboard. Once, no piano player was available, and I had to fill in to play pre-recorded songs on the keyboard in addition to my speaking duties.

So, I tested my clout and insisted that if I were to speak at HUUC, it would have to be on a choir Sunday. I appreciate the indulgence; if you find my presentation dull and unimaginative, you will still have the choir to inspire and entertain you.

Today, I will not talk about some obscure Unitarian trailblazer who had an enormous impact on the religion. I will not give a book report on an author who influenced my life. I will not expound on a social justice issue dear to Unitarian Universalists. Today, I will tell you stories; I will be relating personal experiences that are a reflection of my faith.

My stories are not the culmination of a lifelong search for truth and meaning. Rather, they are minor epiphanies reached through trial and error that, hopefully, have allowed me to live a more enriching life. Here is one such story . . .

I hate Oprah. She is so narcissistic that she insists on being the only person on the cover of every issue of her magazine. In interviews, she tugs at the heart strings and monopolizes the person's emotions. She feigns surprise at vulnerable revelations. She has lost touch with the very women who have made her so popular.

Here is what one reviewer said about a representative issue of her magazine:

Pictures of Oprah: 22 including her standard cover experience.

“Articles” written, or so she says, by Oprah: 6 including the Oprah staple “What I Know for Sure” in which she lies about how hard her life is and hammers home how much more spiritual she is than the average person.

Use of the phrase “self-revelation”: 94 in 13 different articles referenced earlier.

Ads for Oprah-related products: 7 including one for Dr. Phil's show.

Paragraphs containing poorly veiled condescension: 463.

However, there is one thing that I learned from Oprah rather late in life that has stuck with me. Here is an excerpt from her final TV show that lays it out.

[Oprah Validation Video](#)

Validation can be as simple as a wave, nod, or hello. When I engage in conversation with someone, I make a special effort to nod, not in agreement necessarily, but to acknowledge that I am listening to what that person has to say.

Carolyn and I lived in Connecticut for 5 years in the mid-80's. During our time there, we had to adjust to some regional differences. A purse was called a pocketbook, people brandished umbrellas during snow storms, pop was soda, yard sales were tag sales, a liquor store was a package store, or "the packy" for short. These anomalies were easy to integrate into our everyday lives. However, one difference which I noticed immediately was more difficult to accept.

In Michigan, when you pass a stranger on the sidewalk, there is usually some acknowledgment of the other's existence. A quick nod, a simple hello, a short wave of the hand. In Connecticut, people passed by without any human interaction. You were met with arid stares somewhere beyond your physical body. And this was before the advent of cell phones.

Validation is most important when communicating with your spouse or significant other. From time to time, my wife will expound on her hard day, an intended or unintended slight by another person, the pain in her knees, back, or shoulder. My immediate response used to be to offer solutions which was usually met by an icy stare of "are you listening to me, dummy?" I have since learned that the best validation of her distress is "That sucks!"

For those of you who are introverts, you may find it difficult to validate other people, especially strangers. Let me offer you some tips that I have picked up intuitively. First of all, wear this badge in public (hold up badge). It says "I talk to strangers." I discovered this idea from a newspaper article about a young woman who had recently moved from the United States to England and did not know anyone there. In order to make new friends, her therapist gave her the badge to wear. Sometimes, the badge itself is a conversation starter. However, if you find people put off by the badge or hesitant to speak, you can start the conversation by asking a random, innocuous question about their country.

So, the young woman was standing on a railway deck and asked the man next to her, "Excuse me sir, I am new here, so could you tell me, who is the Queen of England?" The man replied, "Queen Victoria."

Validation can take many forms. One such expression is what I call "Hit and Run" validation. It works especially well with strangers. You notice something you find appealing about the person, usually their appearance, offer a brief but heartfelt comment, and move on before they know who or what hit them. It is one thing to anticipate praise for something that you know is already worthy of it; it is even more satisfying to receive validation from a complete stranger for what you view as normal or mundane.

A couple of weeks ago, while grocery shopping at Meijer, I pushed my cart past a boy of about 12 years of age and his mother. He was crouched down to examine a potential purchase of a food item, and all I could see was the top of his head with this shocking crop of yellow hair. As I passed, I said, "Love the hair". (Always use love not like, it has more impact.) The mom smiled, the boy replied "Thank you", and we all basked in our mutual validation of the other as I turned the corner at the end of the aisle.

At a local restaurant, as my wife and I are seated at our booth, I notice a girl and her grandmother having lunch. I make a brief comment about the joy of having lunch with grandma, remembering the times when my daughter enjoyed a butterscotch sundae with with me at the Occidental Cafe in the

downtown Muskegon Mall. As they left, the grandmother turned toward us and wished us a Merry Christmas. One validation effort is countered by another which forms the basis of human connection.

As a matter of fact, I was surprised at some the reactions to my interactions. At first, I thought that people would be annoyed at my feeble attempts to validate someone's existence. However, more than once, I have had people reply, "No one has ever told me that before." Are people really starved that much for acceptance without judgment?

Sometimes it is easier to compliment strangers than friends or relatives. With strangers, you have no preconceived notions about them; your relationship has not been colored with differences in lifestyle or ideology.

I do not believe in false admiration. Like my father used to say, "If you don't have anything good to say about someone, don't say anything at all."

There is a dark side to validation. Social media is filled with people who are constantly seeking validation from friends and relatives on an almost daily basis. Validation is served and received best in moderation.

In addition to validating others, I found it just as important to self validate. About a month ago, I fulfilled one of my retirement goals and signed up for a gentle yoga class. I wasn't sure if I would like it, but I soon discovered that in addition to the physical benefits of the sessions, I started tuning into the mental aspects of it as well. At the beginning and end of each hour, the instructor usually reads a poem that concentrates on self-awareness. At the beginning you mentally scan your body to determine which areas may need attention. At the end, you express gratitude toward your body for providing it for all of the things required to live: breath, nourishment and digestion, awareness of your surroundings. Here is an excerpt from an untitled poem by Katja Perez:

I am committed to give thanks
to my body that has carried me to this day
I am committing to affirming the health I do have
knowing it will help my life in every single way!

Don't underestimate money as a valid and honorable method of validation. During my career as a financial analyst, I once had a supervisor who thanked his subordinates at every turn for even the most mundane tasks. A co-worker even mentioned to him at a staff meeting why he was being thanked for carrying out tasks that was expected of him as part of his normal job duties for which he received a salary. The supervisor's abundance of gratitude eventually became less effective and almost meaningless as an intrinsic reward.

At my next place of employment, I did some self-analysis of what really motivated me at work. I soon discovered that since I was a few years away from retirement and would soon be on a reduced income, I wanted to maximize my savings in any way possible. So, I put a tip jar on my desk and invited people to put money in it instead of thanking me for a job well done. On the jar, I used a labeler to affix the phrase, "A thank you is good for the ear, but a dollar is better for the stomach." It's a quote from the movie "Kim" based on the novel of the same name by Rudyard Kipling.

Whenever someone offered a "thank you", I replied with "Tip jar is on the table." A few co-workers understood my intent and put a dollar in at regular intervals. One colleague put in a twenty as

prepayment for future thank yous. And others thought of it as a joke and put in change. On retirement day, I had amassed less than \$100. In any event, I theorized that if I had a nickel for every “thank you” from my previous supervisor, I could have retired a few years earlier.

Quite often I had fantasized about writing thank you notes to colleagues that had gone above and beyond the call of duty to provide good service, especially ones who had saved me a lot of extra work. I regret that I never followed through on that fantasy.

My neighbor, Penny, recently fell from a ladder and broke her leg in multiple places the day before she was to start a new job. She was to be confined to a Lazy Boy for 6 to 8 weeks with not enough money to cover her household expenses during that time. A friend posted an appeal on Facebook for money to tide her over until she recovered. I suggested to Carolyn that we provide a generous monetary gift to validate her appeal.

Carolyn was hesitant to send a check in the mail with a card and risk embarrassing Penny and making her feel obligated to return the favor in some way. She instead devised this scheme to put cash in an envelope with the card but without a return address, wait for the mail to arrive, then sneak across the street and put the card in Penny's mailbox. Carolyn either missed witnessing the mail delivery or was scared that Penny would catch her committing mail fraud. We finally mailed the card at our local post office figuring it would minimize travel from the post office directly to her house. Delivery was confirmed a few days later with a post on Facebook from Penny thanking everyone for their support.

A few weeks ago, I went to my local salon for a haircut. I asked the stylist about her holiday and family. She mentioned that one child was at school in person, while the other was learning virtually, not because of Covid, but due to a series of lesser illnesses that was keeping her home. She talked about how she was juggling the responsibilities of work and home while tending to her child's needs. I replied, “It sounds like you're a good mother.” Is she a good mother? I don't know. Has anyone ever told her that she was a good mother? Probably not. Did I ease her burden? Maybe. Did I need to conduct further inquiry about her motherhood status before offering such a validation? I did not feel the need.

Today, I have told you stories where I have tried to illuminate how we can live our UU principles through small, but effective, concrete actions. In the process, you have learned some things about me that you may not have known previously. In doing so, I have opened myself up to validation or criticism. I have let myself become vulnerable in what I hope to be a safe place.

Over the last several years, the Worship and Music Committee has done a phenomenal job of finding and inviting high-quality speakers every Sunday who have informed, inspired, and entertained us. However, in my 30 plus years in association with this church, I have made a few close friends, but for most of you, I know very little. We catch glimpses of one another at joys and concerns or in conversation after the service.

The Worship and Music Committee is always looking for people to give a presentation at a Sunday service. The most interesting ones are when people reveal something unbeknownst to me. Therefore, I am anxious to learn more about you, to open your world just a little bit to the rest of us, to offer your unique perspective on our religion.

If you are concerned about how long such a presentation needs to be, I suggest 5 pages minimum single spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font on 8 x 11 paper with one inch margins. You will easily fulfill

the allotted time of 15 minutes.

I realize that some of you exhibit stage fright. As I prepare a presentation, I do wonder how people will react. But, my love of being the center of attention negates any such fears that may arise. You can be assured that you are in a loving place, a place where any critical judgments are reserved within each of us as a challenge to our own prejudices.

Living out our UU principles is equally valid when expressed in small actions or in grand gestures. I have found what is most comfortable to me. Don't expect to see me at a voting rights rally or environmental clean-up. More likely, I will sneak up to you one day when you least expect it, and offer you the gift of validation.