

**The Gifts of Conversation and Community**  
**Sunday, October 31, 2010**  
**Ben Roberts**

**Opening words:**

Delivered by The Elders of the Hopi Nation, June 2000, Oraibi Arizona  
(<http://www.spiritofmaat.com/messages/oct28/hopi.htm>)

"You have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour. Now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour and there are things to be considered:

"Where are you living? What are you doing?  
What are your relationships? Are you in right relation?  
Where is your water? Know your garden.

"It is time to speak your truth.  
Create your community.  
Be good to each other.  
Do not look outside yourself for the leader. . . .

"This could be a good time!  
There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so good and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold onto the shore. They will feel that they are being torn apart and that they will suffer greatly.

"Know that the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above water. See who is in there with you and celebrate.

"At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally. Least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt. The time of the lone wolf is over.

"Gather yourselves! Banish the word 'struggle' from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

"We are the ones we've been waiting for."

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**Reading:**

From *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, by Peter Block (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2009, p. 139) <http://www.peterblock.com/publications/>:

In our attraction to problems, deficiencies, disabilities and needs, the missing community conversation is about gifts. The only cultural practices that focus on gifts are retirement parties and funerals. We only express gratitude for your gifts when you are on your way out or gone. If we really want to know what gifts others see in us, we will have to wait for our own eulogy, and even then, as the story goes, we will miss it by a few days. In community building, rather than focusing on our deficiencies and weaknesses, which will most likely not go away, we gain more leverage when we focus on the gifts we bring and seek ways to capitalize on them. Instead of problematizing people and work, the conversation that searches for the mystery of our gifts brings the greatest change and results.

The focus on gifts confronts people with their essential core, that which has the potential to make the difference and change lives for good. This resolves the unnatural separation between work and life. Who we are at work is our life. Who we are in life is our work. The leadership task—indeed the task of every citizen—is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center. This applies to each of us as an individual, for our life work is to bring our gifts into the world. This is a core quality of a hospitable community, whose work is to bring into play the gifts of all its members, especially strangers.

### **Sermon/Conversation Part 1: the Gifts We Have Received**

That's how Peter Block introduces the idea of the gift conversation in his book [\*Community: The Structure of Belonging\*](#). This is one of six simple conversations he suggests have the power when used together, to create a transformative community. I love that last idea: "The core quality of a hospitable community... is to bring into play the gifts of all its members, especially strangers." I was a stranger to this community when my wife Kim and I walked through these doors in February 2009. I didn't think I was coming here to have my gifts brought into play. I didn't really even know what gifts I had to offer. What I did know was that we were looking for a community and that we immediately loved the one we found here.

Talk about hospitality! You welcomed us with open arms, and hearts. And then somehow, I found myself exploring gifts I didn't know I had, and being given gifts of support, encouragement and, perhaps most important of all, the space to grow. I found myself on a new and unexpected path. One focused around the joy, and transformative power, to be found in conversations. I discovered that I loved to convene and host groups of people in dialogue, that it was easy to do and that other people loved it too. Then I began to learn, from the work of Peter Block and others like him, that certain kinds of conversations--where people are highly energized around things that matter to them, and are focused around questions that bring forth alignment, collaboration and creative thinking— that *those kinds* of conversations can actually create communities that are transformative.

In other words, I learned that I had a gift for creating the possibility of transformation (and oh, by the way, it's something available to all of us, not some rare commodity).

That's a pretty exciting concept, and it's given me an entirely new and thrilling direction to pursue in my work and my life, maybe even as my life's work.

I have UUCD to thank for that. So many of you in this congregation have touched my life, directly and indirectly, including simply by showing up here today. As our wonderful new minister Barbara Fast likes to say, "thank you, thank you, thank you!" Two people were particularly generous in their willingness to connect with, support and encourage me over the past year and a half. Our dear Reverend Sue was one, and I had the chance to thank her several times before she moved on to her next congregation. The other was Scot Fritz. And I'm sad to say that I didn't thank him properly. So I would like to do so now. Nobody more directly embodied the spirit of hospitality than Scot, always at the door to welcome you and eager to have a conversation, or to connect you with others in the room. Just after we began attending UUCD, I decided more or less out of the blue to host a weekly "discussion salon" at Mocha, the coffee house across the street from my Newtown office, and Scot was my biggest fan. He showed up regularly with bunches of other people, from this congregation as well as others in his circle of friends.

Without that support, my first attempt at convening groups might well have failed, and I would never have taken the next step. That came after a year of those weekly discussion salons, when something called the Coffee Party Movement emerged and suggested that people form groups and meet in coffee houses (!) to discuss how to change our broken political system. Naturally I was all over that idea, and once again, Scot was my number one supporter.

He was particularly delighted to hear that I was going to use a conversational process called a "[world café](#)" for my first coffee party meeting—a process he had tried to introduce to me when I began the salon a year earlier by lending me Margaret Wheatley's book *Turning to One Another*. That was last March. Since then I have become passionate about the world café, and just recently I have been invited to host them online on behalf of the main organization supporting their use: the World Café Community Foundation.

The coffee party connection also led me to another group, called [FOURYEARS.GO](#), whose mission is, in the words of Lynne Twist, one of the movement's founders, to "ignite a global conversation that will bring forth a just, flourishing and sustainable new world." When Scot died, I was on my way to a three day gathering of the leaders of [FOURYEARS.GO](#), having been asked by them to help design and facilitate the conversational processes for their event. It was an incredible experience, and all throughout, I kept thinking about how, if it hadn't been for Scot's support, I might never have had that opportunity, along with many others that continue to unfold. Thank you, Scot. Thank you for your support, your wisdom and your friendship. So now, it's your turn to thank one another for the gifts you have received here. That's the first part of Peter Block's "Gift Conversation." Ask yourself: what gifts have you received from others in this room? How have people engaged with you in ways that have meaning? Even if you are brand new to this congregation, perhaps someone welcomed

you with the same kindness and enthusiasm I received from Scot Fritz? Maybe something in this service has touched you. Or perhaps you're simply grateful to be able to spend an hour or so in this lovely and welcoming space.

I'd like you all to get up from your seats now, unless it's physically uncomfortable to do so, and walk slowly around the room. Take your personal belongings with you so you don't have to come back to the same chair. Walk in a random direction, but with purpose. Make eye contact. Smile! Ask yourself:

- What gifts have you received from others in this room?
- How have people engaged with you in ways that have meaning?
- How have you been touched?
- How have you been welcomed?
- What does it feel like to be in this space?

Now stop and find a seat with three other people nearby. Turn your chairs so you're facing one another in a small circle. We'll take about fifteen minutes to talk in your groups. Introduce yourselves briefly if you don't know one another, and if you do, say hello. And then take turns talking specifically, in a bit of detail, about what emerges for you as you consider those questions. If someone in your group thanks you personally, don't deflect or minimize what you are being told by saying something like "oh, it wasn't that big a deal." Instead, say "thank you. I like hearing that." Can we all practice that just for a moment, please? *[Lead the congregation as we repeat this in unison]*

If you have time to go around your circle more than once, talk about what you have received from one another in this conversation as well. When you hear the chimes, that will be the signal to bring our conversations to a close.

And as you converse, do so in the spirit invoked by the Hopi Elders: "gather yourselves! Banish the word 'struggle' from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration. We are the ones we have been waiting for." You may begin.

*Approximately fifteen minutes of small group conversation follows...*

Now, in lieu of our normal spoken milestones, I'd like to ask anyone who is so inclined to come up and share with us something you just heard that touched you, or moved you, or was of value to you, and to thank the person who said it. Or if there's someone you really want to thank from the congregation who wasn't in your group, you're welcome to come up and do that too. We'll take about ten minutes for this, so there's time for plenty of you to come up.

## **Sermon/Conversation, Part 2: Bringing Our Gifts to the World**

*Note: there was no written sermon for this portion of the service. Congregants were asked to meditate on the five questions below, and then invited to share what emerged for them as they did so. Two readings from accompanied the process. Both the readings and the questions are taken from Peter Block, op cit, p.142.*

*First reading (to set the context for the meditation and conversation to follow):*

Beyond the conversation about what gifts occurred in this gathering, we each have to deal with the extent that we are bringing the gifts given to us at birth or beyond into the world. We are aware of our deficiencies beyond belief or utility. What we are blind to are our gifts, the ones unique to us. These are qualities we have not earned but that have come to us as an act of grace. Our work in life is to know and accept these gifts, for this is what is required to bring them forth.

*Questions for meditation:*

- What is the gift you currently hold in exile?
- What is it about you that no one else knows?
- What are you grateful for that has gone unspoken?
- What is the positive feedback you receive that still surprises you?
- What is the gift that you do not fully acknowledge?

*Meditation with music and silently, followed by a full group conversation about what emerged for people as they contemplated the questions...*

*Second reading (to close the conversation):*

As with all the conversations, there may be no immediate and clear answer to these questions. It doesn't matter. The questions themselves work on us, and when they are asked, this work is activated. In the asking, we are creating space for gifts, which are central to restoration, restoration that wants to occur at this moment. The questions, in this way, are the transformation, simply being named.

Closing benediction, from the beginning of Psalm 133: *Hinay ma tov umanayim, shevet achim dam yachad.* "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to gather together in unity!"