

## *The Wisdom of Crowds*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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Rev. Paul Beckel

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

*Mark Morrison-Reed*

### **WELCOME**

If you've seen today's title, "The Wisdom of Crowds" you may be expecting me to talk about how powerful we can be if we would all just get along, be agreeable, chip in, and work together. I could say that. I could offer a touchy feely ode to thoughtful collaboration and synergy. I could talk that way because I affirm all of that idealism. But according to the book from which I borrowed today's theme, the groups that are *most capable* of innovation and solving problems are groups made up of independent individuals with free minds... people who are not too quick to compromise... and not overly influenced by their allegiance to the group.

So how do we reconcile such important principles as partnership and connection with the equally important ideals of freedom and autonomy? We'll be exploring this question today as we pay tribute to the democratic process, by gathering for our annual congregational meeting following the service.

Also today we rejoice in the decision this week to deny permission for a coal port at Cherry Point. This is another example of a public process to weigh important principles against one another in order to collectively arrive at a wise long term judgment about the greater good.

In this spirit we light the chalice as we say together our covenant...

**GATHERING SONG**      *Gather the Spirit*      #347

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**      *Wanda's Roses* by Pat Brisson

Summary: Little Wanda finds a thornbush in a vacant lot and with enthusiasm begins to remove the trash which she thinks is keeping the bush from blooming. Her neighbors are skeptical, but grateful for her efforts. Week after week, she cleans, waters, and invites the neighbors to hope with her that the old thornbush will bloom. Finally she invites everyone to a party to celebrate the blooming. Just to be sure, she ties paper roses to the bush. And her neighbors, not wanting Wanda to be disappointed, bring real rose bushes to plant. By summer it is as she had predicted: the lot is filled with the most beautiful flowers they could imagine.

### **CHAMBER CHOIR**

BUF and Bellingham and our whole interdependent web of humanity are filled with eccentricity. We are alike in so many ways but we are also quite individual in our ways of being in the world. Let's listen now as Kermit the Frog philosophizes about both the yearning to *find ourselves in synch with others...* and the glory of *being our own unique selves. ...Bein' Green*, by Joe Raposo

### **MEDITATION/SILENCE (2:00)**

## RESPONSIVE READINGS

Oh Freedom! There is an important tension, a creative tension, that resides deep within the concept of freedom. Freedom—which in my mind is inseparable from the concept of *responsibility* to the community which creates the conditions within which freedom can exist.

As the concept and practice of freedom blossomed in this country with the establishment of the Bill of Rights in the late 1700s, religious freedom—freedom of conscience—was a central component. And so Rev. William Ellery Channing, the founder of American Unitarianism, addressed this topic and we have some of his thoughts in our hymnal, responsive reading #592, “The Free Mind.” Let’s read that together....

But has our collective understanding of freedom perhaps shifted too far in its emphasis upon the individual? The bright light of Unitarian scholarship in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rev. James Luther Adams, boldly proposed to supplement Channing with some words about the free church: what it can mean to be free even when we choose to be in relationship. Let’s read #591 together....

## MESSAGE

Was individual freedom of conscience more necessary to emphasize in the early American period because this was a rather new concept and not fully supported by conventional wisdom of that day? Today, instead, is *group* consciousness important to reassert, when we may have pushed the pendulum too far, and religious freedom is being twisted beyond recognition into an egoistic justification for denying others equality?

I think that the tension we observe in the shifting emphasis in those two responsive readings, one emphasizing individual conscience, and other highlighting community...I think of this as a creative tension. There is another tension, though, that might come to mind when you hear the phrase “wisdom of crowds.” That is, you might simply think that the idea of groups having collective intelligence as nonsense. Such cynicism is warranted, I think. Even if this hasn’t been your primary experience of working with others, we know that the phrases “mob rule” and “group think” and “death by committee” have come into existence out of real examples of collective stupidity.

It’s true: groups, crowds, teams, congregations, and families can behave in ways that are wise or otherwise. James Surowiecki suggests that it all depends on the conditions within which groups operate. Surowiecki writes the financial pages for the New Yorker, and coined the phrase, “the wisdom of crowds” for a book in which he suggests some very counter-intuitive ideas about how groups—given the right conditions—can be remarkably intelligent, and often even *smarter than the smartest individuals within the group*.

We’d better hope he’s right. Because if we believe that groups inevitably pull everyone down toward some mediocre average, or a lowest common denominator, then how can we justify democratic institutions? Are we saying that we’d rather have all important decisions made by a single wise guy? A demagogue, or pope? By self-appointed aristocrats, plutocrats, or by your idiotic boss? I think not. So we must look around to find something to give us hope in our collective creative potential. Let’s consider the chili dump.

My experience of the chili dump was as a potluck dinner in which everyone brought chili and it all got dumped together into one big pot. Well, two pots, one vegetarian and one with meat. The results were marvelous.

Similarly when groups attempt to estimate, say, the weight of an ox, or guess how many jellybeans are in a jar, the average guess of the whole group often turns out to be much closer to the correct answer than even the best individual guess.

Now these are uncomplicated examples with problems that actually have answers. In the case of the chili, the answer is not quite as objective as how many jellybeans—but still you can roughly determine whether or not it worked.

But does this have anything to do with the truly important and challenging problems that groups of people need to face together: a jury determining someone's guilt or innocence... congress balancing the ideals of environmental protection against short term economic growth... or a congregation making value judgements with its budget... or grappling with what its mission ought to be. Can groups make intelligent decisions about things like this?

Surowiecki asserts that there are four basic conditions which need to be present for groups to function at their best. First they need information. For example with the jelly bean jar they have to be able to see it so they're making a somewhat informed guess. In general, groups acting out of ignorance, or using false information, tend to come to unsatisfying conclusions.

Second, groups need diversity of life experience, points of view, and ways of approaching a problem. Demographic diversity, that is in age race gender class sexual orientation physical ability theology, and national origin...diversity across these demographic categories often entails diversity in life experience, points of view, and ways of approaching a problem, but not necessarily.

For example, in the 1970s a team of NASA scientists brought the Apollo 13 astronauts back to earth safely after a serious malfunction in space. The makeup of that team was very different from the one 30 years later when the space shuttle Columbia came back to us in pieces. If you conjure an image of early NASA scientists, you might not think about diversity: white males in white shirts, crew cuts, and horn-rimmed glasses. Compare this to contemporary men and women of every race in haphazard dress. But the earlier group came to the young NASA program after success in a variety of industries. Whereas today's NASA engineers and management tend to come straight from graduate school, making them more homogenous in thought than in appearance.

This is just one example of a group of "smart" people who may not be as good at assessing and solving a problem compared to a group of less traditionally educated folks with a wider range in perspectives and skills. Ironically, group intelligence may require a constant influx of inexperience and naiveté.

Which brings us to welcoming our new members.

But first, I'll briefly mention the other two qualities of groups that act with collective intelligence: decentralization, and independence.

What is decentralization? Flocks of birds are made up of hundreds or thousands of individuals forming and reforming in fabulous coordination, but following no one's command. I love watching this phenomenon. Each bird follows its instinct for self-preservation and a few simple rules: try to get as close to the center of the flock as possible, and stay a few inches away from everyone else.

Or think of the World Wide Web. The web is powerful and less vulnerable to breakdown because it has no center. Every node is connected but also independent. Computers all over the world link with one another based upon minimal rules and communication standards. Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the web, concludes

his memoir by describing why he became a Unitarian Universalist—how he sees our way of doing religion to be comparable to the powerful *interdependence* he designed into the World Wide Web.

(On a side note I see God as the decentralized ever-expanding whole of matter and consciousness, with direction but no director...but I guess that will have to be another sermon.)

And finally, independence. Like in our hymn, “I’m on my way to the freedom land,” which, you may remember continues “I’ll ask my sister, come and go with me...I’ll ask my brother come and go with me...” but then concludes rather starkly: “If they say no, I’ll go anyhow.”

Having an independent mind means neither being overly influenced by others, nor overly influencing others. Now I often say that one of the beauties of congregational life is that we can learn from one another...and be good models to one another. The living tradition we share draws upon many sources, including the examples we observe from courageous principled people. *And yet...*we are properly wary not to imitate one another to the point of conformity. Groups are always stronger when they make room for dissent.

Because if we go nowhere until we have unanimous agreement, then we go nowhere. (And I’m going to talk more about that—going somewhere—next Sunday. For now and in the week ahead, think about the groups in which you find yourself (families, organizations, workgroups). Think about helping them to be informed, diverse, and decentralized, with independent members...knowing that each of these qualities is relative and can be taken too far. Let’s welcome our new members, now, with eyes wide open to these complexities...and our hearts, and our arms open as well!

## **NEW MEMBER WELCOMING**

### **CHAMBER CHOIR**

*It Takes A Whole Village*

### **SEJC COLLECTION**

for Bellingham Childcare

## **BENEDICTION**

May our power expand, but only as it serves to welcome the stranger, bring hope to the disillusioned, honor truth and beauty, and heal the world.