

"Taming One Another"
A Sermon for the Start of An Interim Ministry
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I can't say for sure when the actual "taming" began between us in earnest. But, I reckon that our "beginning" occurred one sunny Sunday morning in the Spring when we encountered each other under a metaphorical apple tree.

I had expressed an interest in the Interim position here and Deb Lehman, your President reached out to me and the transition team scheduled an online interview. We collectively wondered: How would it all unfold?

The conversation went well, references were checked, you offered me the position, and here I am, a month or so in to this new adventure and the taming between us has picked up steam. I didn't know it back in the Spring really, but what you were asking me, tentatively at first, was, "Will you tame us?" and "Will you allow yourself to be tamed?"

We have been called into relationship, you and I; and I've already learned a bit about taming since that auspicious beginning. I've come here as a relative stranger and you've already made room for me in this Sanctuary, in your homes, in your visions and dreams, your fears and regrets.

You've shared meals with me, music with me, your frustrations, your worries, your joy, your lemon squares and soups, your talents, your humor, and your pride as members of this community.

As I sat in the late afternoon quiet of my home study this week, leafing through my computer files of UUCM newsletters and other collected materials, I was amazed by how much I've already come to know you, your lives, and your connections here.

Even so, I'm mindful of the fact that relationships are not easy or instantaneous. They are notoriously difficult to establish and maintain. Marriage, kinship, friendship, business and pastoral bonds ..they require intention, faith, risk-taking, love, forgiveness, loyalty, and self exposure.

In the Little Prince vignette which Rachel and I shared earlier this morning, we witness the evolution of a "taming" as a wise fox under an apple tree teaches a curious boy what is required to be in relationship with him; what it means to tamed, bonded, kindred, connected.

The philosopher Martin Buber would likely approve of the outcome between the boy and the creature. He would call it an "I-thou" relationship; one that is mutual, reciprocal, and genuine. One that creates a "circle of caring." And we can learn so very much, glean so much usable truth, from this seemingly simple tale.

First, from this story, we learn that **RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES RISK-TAKING**. The fox takes a risk by inviting the Little Prince to tame him, to establish ties with him, and the boy takes an equal risk by agreeing. Establishing

ties is risky business, and as the fox explains, "it is an act too often neglected." But the risks and the labor of establishing ties are worth it because being in relationship, *true* relationship, transforms us.

A colleague once said, "A ship is safe in a harbor, but that is not what a ship is for." The same applies to us. We are here to take risks. The kind of risks we accept knowingly and voluntarily, risks we run in order to live our lives the way we feel we should live them, to pursue the goals we have set for ourselves, the ideas to which we devote ourselves.

Foremost among them is the risk we take when we love. We cannot live without loving others, and each time we love someone we take a risk, the risk of being rejected. We cannot live without trusting others and each time we trust somebody we take a risk of making ourselves vulnerable to the misuse of that trust. " (Rev. G. Peter Fleck)

My hope is that during the Interim time, the risks we take in our relationships here, as minister and congregation, will embolden us to take important, sometimes scary risks in our *other* primary relationships -- with partners, family members, friends, colleagues, with one another here at UUCM, with strangers or "the other" we encounter; to commit in *every* relationship to become trusting and vulnerable, to love kindness, to act gratefully, and to be compassionate. That we might develop a deeper capacity to apologize and forgive, to laugh and weep, to speak the truth to others, as we know it, in love, to value one another's uniqueness.

To tame or to be tamed, one must be willing to take risks.

Second, we learn that **RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES PATIENCE AND INTENTION**. "You must be very patient," explains the Fox. "First you will sit a little distance from me, like that, in the grass. I will look at you out of the corner of my eye. You will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstanding. But you will sit closer to me everyday."

I say to you this morning: "If you let me, I will sit closer to you everyday, but I will come only as close as you wish; abiding in silence and in words, in humor and in tears. I welcome your trust and I will not abuse it."

It takes time to move closer on the grass, so let's endeavor to be patient. As Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests, "It is foolish to plant an acorn in the morning and expect to rest in the shade of an oak in the afternoon." We mustn't be hurried in matters of the heart and spirit. Yet, "taming," like loving and caring, is a verb; it is active. It takes discipline, intention.

In my view, there are three vital intentions that we must consider and then embrace when we establish ties --

One, we must truly *want* to love and figure out how. Two, we must find an opening through which our love can flow into the life of another; and three, we must become unhurried in the taming. It is nearly impossible to be attentive and really be present when we're rushing around or pushing the process. That's what the Little Prince means when he says, "It is the time that I have *wasted* on my rose that makes my rose so important."

"Wasted?" It's fascinating to me that St. Exupery chose the word "waste," instead of more noble verbs like "devote" or "expend" to describe the Little Prince's care-taking of his rose. We've been conditioned to abhor the concept of wasting time -- in our fast-paced, throw-away culture, it conjures up an image of non-productive slacking. So what does it mean to "waste time" on relationships? I believe it implies time freely given and unmeasured, even when its inconvenient, with the awareness that without this "wasted time" we are not truly important to one another, we are not tamed.

To tame or to be tamed, one must be willing to be patient and intentional. One must be willing to waste time.

Third, from our tale, we learn that **RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES DEPENDABILITY**. The Little Prince comes back the next day and the Fox tells him, "It would have been better if you had come at the same hour. One must observe the proper rituals." (more actions too often neglected!)

As your minister, be assured that you count on me to be there for you, to return your phone calls and emails, to show up, to listen and respond, to serve as an oasis of for you in times of crisis, to observe the proper rituals of our relationship. During my student ministry in Wayland, MA when a parishioner would apologize for bothering me with some dilemma, I'd reply, "Bother me! Please bother me! You are why I'm here. You are why I'm a minister!"

To tame or to be tamed, one must be willing to be dependable and present. One must be willing to be "bothered."

Fourth, we learn that **RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES BEING KNOWN**.

The Fox doesn't mince words when he tells the boy, "To me you are nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys, and I have no need of you. And to you, I am nothing more than a Fox who is just like a hundred thousand other foxes, and you, on your part, have no need of me."

"But if you tame me, we shall need each other, To me, you shall be unique in all the world; and to you, I shall be unique in all the world." The fox wants to be known and to know the Little Prince. "One only understands the things that one tames," he remarks, " If you want a friend, tame me."

To be sure, "genuine relationships will not allow us our secure hiding places, and in that sense, they are costly," writes the Rev. Marilyn Sewall. "They will cost us the image of the person we imagine ourselves to be. But this is the pay off -- they will inevitably bring forth more of who we really are and make us more fully alive, more available to the world. They will bring forth the strength and goodness and beauty that already reside within."

In the story, when the Prince decides to move on, the Fox is understandably sad and he cries, causing the lad to remark that the taming has done the creature no good at all. But, once again, the wise fox knows better. Being in authentic and safe relationships, even those that end, transforms us and makes us unique in all the world to others. And that does us a great deal of good.

We live by the grace of being known to others, lovingly. We give life to others by knowing them, lovingly. This epitomizes reciprocity, a mutuality of knowing. There is "I and Thou." which upholds life and creates a circle of caring.

To tame or to be tamed, one must be willing to be known enough, exposed enough, bonded enough, to become unique in all the world to another.

And finally, we learn that **RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES HEART.**

Back in September of 2000, my then 10-year-old daughter Michaela gave me a fortune cookie fortune taped to a piece of white note paper -- it reads: "The heart is wiser than the intellect."

I took that with me when I went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee at the UUA, I carried it in my pocket during my candidating week for my first settlement in Reading, MA, and I keep it on my desk to remind me that ministry is a heart-centered calling and that congregations are heart-centered communities.

The Jewish wisdom text tells us: "God wants heart." Surely, that is what we want most from one another, as well...heart. Being in relationship, being "tamed" means having your heart open -- sometimes that means having it *broken* open. "The fox, a furry Zen Master to the end, shares a secret to that effect with the boy and by association, with us, here in this Sanctuary. "Its a very simple secret," he explains..."It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." "What is essential is invisible to the eye," repeated the Little Prince so that he would be sure to remember.

At this point in the story, the lad is preparing to move on to his next adventure. For us, there is a no leave-taking on the horizon, and the taming will continue and the relationship will deepen. How I welcome that and honor the gift of that.

To tame or be tamed, one must be willing to take risks, to be patient, intentional, and dependable, to be bothered and known, and to open one's heart. In every relationship, we must ask ourselves if we are willing. I am willing. How about you?

We have time for getting the taming right; for practicing it with one another and with others. Yes, we will likely make some mistakes with each other. We are human, after all. We may disappoint, we may misinterpret, we may not handle every situation just so...but I can promise you, that I will abide. I will show up, I will foster joy, I will open my heart, I will take this and other tamings in my life seriously. And I ask you to do the same, with me and with one another, and with all of those who meet you under that metaphorical apple tree.

And, I'll strive to always remember (and I hope you will, too) the myriad ways in which our time together, here at UUCM will bring the Little Prince's secret to life: that the quality of caring which is essential to community, essential to all of our relationships, and essential to a shared ministry is invisible to the eye, but that it is seen rightly and clearly by the heart.

"People have forgotten this truth," warns the Fox, "but you must not forget it. You become responsible forever for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose."

"I am responsible forever for my rose," repeated the Little Prince to himself so he would be sure to remember.

"I become responsible forever for what I have tamed." repeated this minister, carefully and gladly to *herself*, so she would never, ever forget.

May it be so.

Blessed be and Amen.

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