

## The Wellspring of Intimacy By Mellen Kennedy

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Our small group is wrestling with the topic of "Protection Versus Openness to Others," a topic which group members themselves had proposed and decided to address. Dan has just been telling us he's an introvert. In an unassuming smile, in an understated way he addresses the group. The topic has brought his attention back to a prayer he had written years ago as the culmination of a year-long group experience. He reads the prayer aloud to the group. As he speaks, a hush falls over the group. The beauty, humor and sincerity, the truthfulness of Dan's own prayer stirs us deeply. It is a moment of awe and intimacy.

That great Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, has said that what draws people to our churches is a need for "Intimacy and Ultimacy." And the needs which small group ministry is addressing in our congregations is just these needs for Intimacy (community, connection, or friendship) and Ultimacy (what really matters, the depths, the Divine). For a group to be healthy and true to the promise which Small Group Ministry offers, it needs to be a place where our need for intimacy is met.

And what is intimacy? We tend to think that it's knowing all the details of a person's life. However, I think true intimacy can be quite the opposite. A friend said to me recently "I hate the word 'sharing'. It means someone is going to dump their stuff on you and then walk away." I laughed because I knew what he meant. This is what I've heard jokingly referred to as "Over sharing!" That kind of "sharing" is an outpouring of details, not intimacy. "Details" comes from the French meaning, "to cut apart." The details are the broken up pieces.

The word "intimacy" comes from the Latin root, "intus" meaning "within." It's the superlative version of "intus", so it means "the most within." What is intimate is not the details of our lives, the surface stuff. The intimate is the wholeness, the truth that is most within -- that is our soul or our spirit. The surface details of our lives are not as intimate as the spiritual wholeness, who we really are inside.

With Dan's permission, I tell about Dan's sharing because he brought to us something from within the most intimate place. It's the place from which the prayer of his soul had been written and from which this prayer was being lived. We felt honored and humbled by the sharing. It was a powerful moment of intimacy shared by the group.

As facilitators how do we encourage intimacy? As with all aspects of facilitation, we create an environment of intimacy by becoming comfortable with it and living it ourselves. I think that going to the place most within and finding the words to articulate the truth that you have found there, is engaging in intimacy with oneself. And then at select and appropriate times being willing to come out and communicate with others what is most within, that's intimacy in a group. I find it helpful to ask myself, "Is my sharing enlivening the group and drawing us closer?" "If so this is true intimacy. "Or are eyes glazing over and do I feel folks distancing?" If so, perhaps I've veered into "sharing" in the pejorative sense of dumping as my friend calls it.

In our Unitarian Universalist sources (listed right after our seven principles in our hymn book), we state that "The living tradition we share draws from many sources" including "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Intimacy is at times daring to share with others our own direct experience of transcending wonder.

Touching these deeper truths of who we are is indeed a renewal of the spirit. This true intimacy is the wellspring of small group ministry. Wishing you the best in your valuable work as a facilitator in tapping this wellspring in your self and in your group.