

Networking is not enough

by Scott J. Rubin at UUCSV, Northumberland, PA

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If there's such a thing as a "network nerd," I may be it. For more than 35 years, my day job has involved studying, working with -- and often against -- what are sometimes called the network industries. You don't hear that term much outside of nerd-dom, but we live in a world of networks, many of which are controlled by governments or multi-billion-dollar corporations. Of course we have radio and TV networks, but there's a lot more to it than that. We have electricity networks, natural gas networks, networks for telecommunications, gasoline and fuel oil distribution networks, networks for drinking water delivery and wastewater removal, and all types of transportation networks -- railroads, public roads, waterways, even the sky above us.

On my drive here this morning, I traveled on our network of public roads, passed miles of electricity, and telephone, and cable TV lines, drove past an oil terminal that's part of a network of pipelines that begins outside of Philadelphia, and passed the UPS terminal that's just one node on an international transportation network. And I could go on for hours ... because I'm that kind of nerd! ... but I'll spare you.

We live in a world of networks. And I didn't even mention what may be the most pervasive network of all, the Internet, known as the network of networks, comprised of millions of smaller networks. Physical networks of cables and routers, but also more ethereal networks -- social networks like Facebook, business networks like Linked In, networks for nearly every interest you can think of, and then hundreds more you never would have imagined.

Here's a little network game. Let's take all of the public roads in Pennsylvania, and divide them up so every person in the Commonwealth -- every adult and child -- gets their own piece of road. No overlap. No one else has your piece of road. And I guess that means you're responsible for fixing the potholes, but let's not get bogged down in details! So, we divide up all the public roads in Pennsylvania among all the people in the state -- how much road would each person have? Any guesses?

Fifty feet. We have about 50 feet of public roads for each and every person in Pennsylvania. It's an amazing network that was built over hundreds of years. Back in 1681, William Penn gave land for the construction of cities and towns and wrote: "Great roads from city to city not to contain less than forty foot, in breadth, shall be first laid out and declared to be for high-ways, ... [and] that there may be convenient roads and streets preserved [in the cities and towns], not to be encroached upon by any planter or builder ..." ¹

We've been building networks from the very start of this country. And the idea certainly wasn't original with our founders -- more than 2000 years ago, the Romans built a network of thousands of miles of roads, and an equally impressive network of aqueducts to bring water into the empire's major cities.

¹ Concessions to the Province of Pennsylvania - July 11, 1681, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/pa02.asp.

I understand networks. Less than two years ago, we created Shape of Justice to supply menstrual products to food pantries, shelters, schools, and other organizations serving low-income people. We're building a network of partners, including three (so far) that act as distributors to smaller organizations. Last year we distributed more than 200,000 tampons, pads, and liners across our network in eight counties. So far this year, we've already grown the network to serve four more counties, all across rural Pennsylvania.

But there are other networks in our lives. We go to a meeting or conference, a social event, or even come here to church, and someone says we're expected to network. Meet people. Find a common interest. Add them to your business network, your social network. Like me. Friend me. Link me. Pin me.

I attended a seminar all about networking for lawyers. I'm awful at it. You know how bad I am at networking? I attended the seminar on networking by watching online. I didn't go in person. And I think it's a good thing, too. They tried to teach us how to network; how to come home with at least three new people to add to our Linked In network, and how that could help grow our law practice. If I'd been there in person, I think the facilitator would have fainted because I would have raised my hand and said I'm not on Linked In and I don't want to be.

Because even though I love a good network, to me networks are for things, not people. People should be brought together into communities. Networks are tools to be used. People ... well, we may call some people "tools" but that's not quite the same thing ... People need to be more than nodes on a network. We need to have a real exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

In fact, that's the very root of the term "community" -- to "commune" with others is to "share one's intimate thoughts or feelings" -- and here's the really important part -- the definition continues "especially on a spiritual level."

When we talk about our church community, we don't use that term loosely. We're not building a social network -- we're not just trying to add people to our friends' list or to the Breeze database. A church, a spiritual community is one based on shared responsibility, trust, intimacy, safety, and an often-unstated promise that we're each looking out for the well-being of all of us.

In his book, *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier wrote: "One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing."

There are many ways we commune with each other, ways we build, solidify, and expand our community. We do it by working together at the yard sale, or team-teaching a course, or serving on a committee. We strengthen our community when we celebrate together, mourn together, care for the sick and injured. Communities band together -- no, THIS community bands together -- to raise money to feed hungry children, to supply menstrual products to those who need them, to care for each other as we recover from illness, accident, and loss. We come together in community to nurture each other and the entire congregation that binds us together.

Four centuries ago, John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote about the importance of community to building what would become this country: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.”

I stand here on the first Sunday of our annual pledge campaign. I hope you all received our request for financial support for the next fiscal year. That support also is part of building this community -- providing us with a place to meet, professional leadership, chairs to sit on, and hymnals to read.

We may not think of it each week, but building a community is a long-term project -- sometimes a project spanning a lifetime or several lifetimes. A couple of weeks ago, we celebrated the 28th anniversary of the founding of UUCSV. Actually, it’s the 28th anniversary of our becoming formally chartered as a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It took a couple of years to get to that point.

Think about what that means. Let’s go back 30 years to 1990. We were just getting started with a few people meeting in a living room. No building, no chairs and tables, no hymnals, no classrooms or teachers or curricula.

Within a few months a fledgling community begins to take hold -- people who are committed to each other and, even more importantly, committed to the future. They start meeting in the Priestley Chapel, even though there was no heat in the winter -- except for a couple of kerosene heaters -- no air conditioning in the summer, unless you count opening the windows, and no bathroom.

A chalice is made. Hymnals are purchased. Money is raised so the bills can be paid. A minister is brought in one Sunday a month. A class begins for three children, then four, then a few more. It’s starting to look and act like a community. Help each other, listen, celebrate, grieve, teach and preach, laugh and cry -- all together.

Rent a floor in a building. Then buy the whole thing. Outgrow it. Sell it. Buy another, then outgrow it. Sell and rent and buy again.

And through it all, work together, pool our funds together, worship together, learn together, bring our diverse talents together, laugh together, and cry together.

We lost one of our founders this week. Kathy was our first newsletter editor, led the very first session of our book group, wrote incredibly inspiring sermons, brought Coyote to life, and shared the wisdom and laughter of Robert Fulghum with us. Through her service on the Board, her eloquence from the pulpit, and in so many other ways, Kathy helped to build this community and ensure that it will live well beyond her passing.

We feel the loss of Kathy deeply because we are not a network. We are a community. That’s why we have a pledge campaign. It’s not only to deal with money, though of course that’s the

most visible part of it. It's a time to reflect about this community and how each of us contributes to it. How can you make it better, stronger, more vibrant, more loving, more spiritual, more just?

As we consider our place in this community, we honor the work of those who came before us, build on their successes, and learn from their shortcomings, as we continue to support each other. Let us rededicate ourselves to the future of this community.

Blessed be.