Got Trust?

by Rev. Don Garrett

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I think we all can relate to the profound feeling of gratitude we've felt when we've been in at our wits' end dealing with a serious crisis that overwhelmed our ability to cope, when we've called out to a friend for help and that friend welcomed us, supported us, and gave us what we needed, freely and without reservation.

I certainly can remember times when it happened for me. I was running a graphic design and production business from my home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in the winter of 1984. Things were going well and I decided to spend Christmas and New Years with friends in Philadelphia. It was an exceptionally cold winter, and the temperatures in North Carolina dipped well below zero for several days.

I returned from Philadelphia in the early evening of Wednesday, January second, to the sound of rushing water. When I opened the door I was hit with a cloud of cold jungle humidity. Water was running everywhere. The walls were dripping with moisture, the carpet was soaked, the floors, graphic arts supplies, clothes, bedding, everything.

I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. I found the broken pipe under the sink and turned off the water but the place was a disaster – unlivable, even for a night. I sank into a frustrated confusion. Then I thought of a friend who lived in a condo with an extra bedroom. I called him on the phone (which miraculously still worked), told him what had happened and that I needed a friend. He immediately invited me to come over and stay with him until things got fixed.

I felt so grateful and secure that night at his place. So much of what I owned had been damaged or destroyed but at least I had a warm place to stay and a friend who welcomed me wholeheartedly. I experienced trust that night.

There was another time, years earlier, when I had pitched my tent to camp in the wrong place at the wrong time in a strange town and awoke to see the impossibly shiny shoes of a New York State Trooper in front of my tent. This led

to a day of being processed through the criminal system, fingerprints, mug shots, court appearance, and, amazingly, eventual release.

I was spat out onto the sidewalk with nowhere to go. I hadn't had food or water for nearly 24 hours. I called an old friend who lived nearby. He invited me to stay with him and I can still remember how good the fried chicken and mashed potato dinner tasted that night, over forty years later.

It feels so recall how good it felt to be able to trust a friend when we were in need. We feel gratitude, we feel relief, we feel accepted, and today I'd like to point out that what we feel is trust. Sometimes it's easiest to experience trust when we find ourselves in an extreme situation, when our need is immediate and deep. When someone reaches out and cares for us in our time of trial, our heart opens, relaxes, and we can experience that wonderful feeling called trust.

There are other times when trust is elusive, when needs aren't quite so clear, and when people have quite different opinions about what's going on. Take, for example another situation many of us have experienced at one time or another, especially in our student days: a group living arrangement. There's a large apartment with five bedrooms, kitchen and bath with a living room. Five complete strangers rent each bedroom and share the kitchen and bath.

People buy food and store it in the refrigerator. Mostly they assume that they will eat their own food and that all the others will do the same. There's a kind of implicit trust in this situation as people's assumptions are upheld by compliant behavior. And then, one day, someone opens the refrigerator to find their milk, or their cheese, or their yogurt – or all three – nearly empty or missing. Shock, anger, resentment congeal into the disappearance of trust: any and everyone else in the apartment might be a thief who can't be trusted.

Order breaks down when this happens. In the absence of trust, accusations are made, harsh words are spoken; there are protests of innocence and denial. The kitchen is no longer a place of safety and trust. People start claiming certain areas of certain shelves as their own. They put their names on their food items. Sometimes even named items disappear and the emotional distance between people increases as their hearts clamp shut, frozen by the chill of vanishing trust.

Maybe eventually things get worked out. People talk with one another; agree to abide by a set of rules bringing order and peace to the apartment once again. But the trust is still fragile – crimes have been committed and it could happen again. Everyone keeps an eye out for their stuff.

There's rarely been a clear definition of trust to use as a guideline toward creating and maintaining its profoundly nurturing effects. Today I'd like to draw on the work of the Rev. Blaine Hartford, a Unitarian Universalist minister who spent his career as a consultant with churches and corporations on creating communities of trust.

Rev. Hartford's first contribution is a clear definition of trust. He says that "Trust is a feeling of safety in someone, induced by how much caring, competency and commitment that person believes another person demonstrates within their relationship."

One of the key elements of this definition is what is missing – the nature of the relationship. In the first examples, the dynamic factor is the crisis of the moment, the request for assistance, and the providing of help. The nature of trust here is straightforward. When someone responds to our needs, we feel a sense of trust. Of course, there's a chance that not all three elements of the definition might be fulfilled.

For example, our friend might care for our well-being, and be committed to following through, but might also have a Labrador retriever that demands to share our new bed with us. We might acknowledge the care and commitment, but the lack of competence in providing us with the kind of refuge we need could stand between us and those warm fuzzy feelings of trust for which we might otherwise hope.

Rev. Hartford uses the example of getting onto an airplane. The pilot might be our best friend, might care deeply for our well-being, might be fully committed to our relationship, but if our friend doesn't know how to fly a plane, none of that is going to make us trust them to be our pilot.

Or our friend might offer us a bed for the night but greet us with sarcasm and resentment. This would probably send our warm fuzzies into the deep freeze. Real trust is impossible unless the caring element is present.

And of course, our friend might have an extra bed, feel nothing but compassion and support for our feelings, and still call us back at the last minute to tell us that something even more important had come up and they wouldn't be able to help out after all. Unless the relationship includes the commitment to follow through, trust is not going to happen.

The example of the apartment refrigerator is perhaps more representative of normal day-to-day life. We all get along and imagine we trust and are trusted until it turns out that we had different expectations of each others' behavior. Some think their property rights should be sacrosanct, while others feel that everyone should share and share alike. Each view might feel justifiable to those holding it, but their incompatible assumptions eliminate the possibility of trust.

Trust is a feeling of safety induced in someone by how much caring, competency and commitment this person believes another person is demonstrating within their relationship. Rev. Hartford points out that in a two-person relationship, each of the two people independently develops his or her level of trust. In order to do this, each has to answer the same three questions. These answers usually come as feeling responses rather than rational thoughts. If the feeling response to any one of the questions is weak or low, then the level of trust, or safety in that person will be low, even if the other two questions have strong positive responses.

These are the three questions basic to trust:

1. How much does this person genuinely care for my well being?
2. How competent is this person in the behavioral skills essential to our relationship?
3. How committed is this person to being in and maintaining this relationship?

At some point in the building and maintaining of every relationship, each person asks these three questions. With each new experience, feelings of trust are adjusted in a process that is dynamic and ongoing, even though these questions are rarely asked directly. Instead, each person observes the behavior of the other person as the basis for their conclusions and assumptions.

Rev. Hartford defines collaboration as the essential element in building cultures and climates of trust. Collaborative relationships are intent on empowering their members, which means people helping one another to become more capable and influential, more aware of who each is, and more able to comfortably live and express their individual uniqueness in positive ways. The essential prerequisite for this structure is trust; collaboration can only exist within an environment that creates, nourishes, and maintains trust.

He goes on to say that a collaborative relationship cannot be competitive, but is inclusive, supporting its members in the discovery and experience of resources that are essential for mutual safety, growth and enjoyment. To accomplish this, collaborative relationships foster open, full and honest communication, which a prerequisite for intimacy in any of its many forms. Collaborative relationships are created and sustained when people commit to the idea that their relationships – and what they want to achieve within them – *are equally important*. This means that their relationships are seen as requiring no less attention and maintenance than they give to the means of achieving their goals.

This can sound a little confusing, but its essence is straightforward and simple: in order for a climate of trust to exist, we need to value our relationships at least as much as we value anything else in our lives. This is a profoundly contrary assumption within a culture like ours that values productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness as ultimate ends in themselves, relegating "soft" values like happiness, safety, and trust to the status of things that we might have as a result of accomplishing the goals and tasks we have set out to achieve.

This distinction is especially important for a church like ours. What makes the Beloved Community different from the rest of society is that we can come together to create a climate of trust, of safety; a collaborative climate that values relationship first, and then uses the power of unconflicted, trusting relationship to help our members grow into their fullest potential of wholeness, able to embrace and master the challenges of life and justice with an open heart rather than a closed fist.

The Church Planning Committee and the Committee on Ministry are joining in a Church Covenant Task Force with the goal of answering these three questions together, as a community: How much do we genuinely care for each other's well-being; what behavioral skills do we need to develop; and how committed are we to being in and maintaining our relationships? These are important questions to ask, and they are important questions to answer, both as individuals and as a community.

It all begins here. It all begins in the human heart. It begins with one heart opening to another in trust, caring, and commitment. If we can find the way to give each other what we each need most, our hearts can be free to give to the whole wide world as well.

May it be so.