

Extreme Welcoming

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South Valley Unitarian Universalist Society
Salt Lake City, Utah
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I take to heart the words I hear during our welcoming statement each Sunday.

“Our society is a lay-led, shared ministry. Each of us is responsible for the life and growth of our community;”

I agreed to share in today's worship to reflect on our welcoming practice while our consulting minister Lora Brandis is candidating with another church for her next calling. Lora will be back in this pulpit March 13th after her ordination at her home congregation in Dallas Texas.

Thus, I *inherited* the title of this sermon; “Extreme Welcoming”

Extreme. Beyond Reason or convention. Flagrant. Over the top. Radical.

Sounds like I inherited the kind of language one might hear at the base of the rock climbs in the canyons around Salt Lake City; I can remember when I was younger, living with a group of fellow rock-climbers. My Sunday mornings were very different.

We would rouse one-another bleary eyed in the early morning after an “extreme” night at Confetti’s or DV8, hit a coffee shop and convenience store on the way up the canyon; one for the caffeine jolt, the other for a bar of high-efficiency, tasteless food product, too eager to hit the rock to stop for real food, counting on youth and a wonderfully nauseating combination of coffee and smushed food product to push ourselves that extra inch, to cling to the rock for one more moment, to try and throw that one dyno to the sweet bucket we failed to hit the week before.

It was extreme dude...

But “extreme” welcoming? Radical welcoming?

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In my research, I found a sermon on Radical Hospitality by Rev. Marilyn J. Sewell and I liked her opening:

Radical hospitality. Radical means “out of the ordinary,” “revolutionary,” even. So what would it mean to receive someone—a stranger—with a presence that was not just polite, but to receive them with revolutionary generosity?

A revolutionary generosity? An extreme welcoming.

“Welcoming” is a word that we find everywhere in our faith; it is in our opening words each Sunday morning.

You are welcome here no matter your age, your size, the color of your eyes, your hair, your skin. You are welcome here no matter whom you love, how you speak, or whatever your abilities. You are welcome here whether you come with laughter in your heart or tears. You are welcome here. If you come here with an open mind, a loving heart and willing hands, you are welcome here. “

I know from speaking to friends and members of this congregation the meaning those words can convey; the greeting, the invitation that many feel, and the profound impact that finding a place that wants them, that welcomes them, can have on people.

Unitarian Universalism identifies as a welcoming faith; the opening words on the home page of the UUA website are:

Our congregations are places where we gather to nurture our spirits and put our faith into action by working toward social justice in our communities and the wider world. There is no formal conversion process, so becoming a Unitarian Universalist (UU) is simply a matter of self-identification. **Newcomers are always welcome at UU churches.** Membership in local congregations is voluntary and does not require renouncing other religious affiliations or practices.

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The word “welcoming” is so much a daily part of our congregational life that I think it runs the risk of becoming commonplace among us, something passed over in our busy lives where our attention goes to the greatest crisis, the larger moment.

Maybe its my Buddhist studies coming to the surface, that Chan or Zen Buddhist part of me that loves to find meaning in simple actions, that seeks to find meaning and depth not just in what is new, brightest or loudest, but in what we repeat, what we practice.

I read Jan’s sermon from last week, and was touched by his idea that it is our actions themselves which carry meaning; that acts of service and kindness are their own reward. That concept to me is very reminiscent of Buddhist practice, and I think our practice is like planting seeds in the garden of ourselves that grow into our sense of who we are in our world, our community and ourselves.

As a faith, although we hold diversity central to our identity, Unitarian Universalism has not always sustained the practice of welcoming the diverse, our mindfulness has faltered at times. I remember the sermon I gave last summer about Religious Pioneers, the prophetic sisterhood who helped define the culture of Universalism throughout the west, but whom were not welcomed into the institution of our liberal religious faith.

We can tell ourselves that such prejudices live deep in our past; though last year, at our General Assembly, Rev Dr. Mark Morrison Reed spoke about the controversy surrounding black empowerment in the UUA from 1967-1970 and how our struggles to reconcile our faith in the democratic process with our commitment to service still influences our culture today some 40 years later.

"No one who was involved has felt understood or appreciated, much less honored. Today, I come to honor their passion and their fervor and their commitment to principle, and to argue that it did make a difference."

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I am sure that if we stop and reflect, we can all think of moments where we failed to be as open, eager, and welcoming of the diverse as we would like.

Rev Dr. Reed goes on to say that those events have shaped our commitment to diversity as a faith and how Ever afterward, "we accepted an oppressed group's right to gather together, to explore its identity, to formulate a strategy, and take a stance."

Our recovery from such moments helps us to define who we are. It grants us an opportunity to grow and to make different choices as we move forward; sometimes I think it is those moments where we failed to live up to our ideals that push us forward.

In 1987 the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Common Vision Planning Committee found many negative attitudes, deep prejudices, and profound ignorance about bisexual, gay, and lesbian people, which resulted in the exclusion of bisexual, gay, and lesbian people from their churches. Today, over half our congregations are welcoming. Considering that our average congregational size is 100, so many of our communities are very small, that half number is significant.

The Welcoming Congregation program was designed to help us overcome attitudes of prejudice and bigotry, and I am proud to be a part of a community that is a Welcoming Congregation.

Our Sunday morning words are an important reminder of how we want to behave; they highlight the importance of welcoming diversity in our community.

Diversity is challenging for us as human beings. Political scientist Robert Putnam, in studying the effects of diversity, published findings in 2007 that high diversity is associated with:

- Lower confidence in local government, local leaders and the local news media.
- Lower political efficacy – that is, confidence in one's own influence.
- Lower frequency of registering to vote, but more interest and knowledge about politics and more participation in protest marches and social reform groups.

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- Less expectation that others will cooperate to solve dilemmas of collective action (e.g., voluntary conservation to ease a water or energy shortage).
- Less likelihood of working on a community project.
- Less likelihood of giving to charity or volunteering.
- Fewer close friends and confidants.
- Less happiness and lower perceived quality of life.
- More time spent watching television and more agreement that "television is my most important form of entertainment".

His findings supported the idea that diversity intimidates us, that we do not welcome it, but that our instinct is to pull away, withdraw and distrust. To me, the manifestation of our impulse to withdraw to gravitate to be with those who are like us, is not hard to see in the world around us...

Recently in October 2010 Robert Putnam and his co-author David E. Campbell published "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" finding that even though religious practice in America trends toward polarization, it is tempered by an acceptance based on familiarity.

Apparently, their more recent work tells us that knowing someone of another faith makes us more tolerant of those who hold that faith.

So, Putnam's findings suggests that although high diversity stresses our ability to trust and pushes us into isolation; the more we engage with others of a diverse nature, the more tolerant we become.

The more we know those of another faith, the more tolerant we become...

I think that our hope for welcoming goes even beyond tolerance.

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Researching this sermon, I sought the origin of the word “welcoming” – and I discovered the word was so common online, that it was hard to find what it meant; I had to wade through page after page of websites that started “Welcome to...”

Ultimately, through practice, I did find the origin of “welcome” – it comes from Old English from the concept of a “willed comer” – a desired guest.

There is something there that preaches to us of more than just tolerating diversity.

Recently, I came here to Lance Ashton's memorial service. I spoke during the service. I recalled the warm hugs, his love for South Valley, and a sense of connection Lance and I shared in our disabilities, a feeling of learning to be ok with that which we could not change.

But there was something I saw watching others at Lance's memorial, something I heard in their words that was so much more important to me than anything I could possibly have said.

At that memorial service, I saw people in suits talking to people with tattoos and facial piercings. I saw conservative family members and business associates hug friends clearly more liberal and alternative. I listened to stories about Lance that demonstrated a commitment that went beyond accepting others, beyond tolerating diversity, to inviting and celebrating it. Here was a man whose welcoming attitude towards diversity brought one diverse yet deeply desired guest after another into his circle.

I can recall thinking, maybe even saying, “there was a man who not only came to church in our faith, he practiced it every day.”

In his powerful welcoming, Lance cultivated an intersection of communities in his life where people of great diversity had the opportunity to get to know one-another, to learn to accept one-another, and ultimately, to learn to welcome one-another. That work is important; because if Putnam's research is true, there is a requirement to grow and increase our ability to be different together without withdrawing.

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If Putnam's conclusions from his decades of research are true, we need the opportunity to get to know others who are not like us; we have to have places where they are welcome enough that we come to know them in order to grow comfortable with their diversity.

I recall people talking about the amazing welcoming power of Lance's coffee shop....and I cannot help but reflect on what I've heard spoken about our goals as Unitarian Universalists to create beloved community.

In his reading "*For religion to be significant*" Rev [*Mark L. Belletini*](#) says

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also had to provide opportunities for deepening, for what I call spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work....

Our spiritual work; like the practice of a man who welcomed diversity into his life, invited that "well comer" – that happily greeted traveller into his coffee shop, and created diverse connections that continued on after his passing.

We are committed to being a welcoming community, and we belong to a faith that is committed to the "inherent worth and dignity of all." But we are human beings, and we share the same challenges we feel more comfortable with people we know. We come to church, we gravitate to those we know. I

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remember my first visit to South Valley; after the initial greeting I found myself alone at coffee hour among people eagerly catching up with one-another. My mother-in-law described a similar experience.

I understood then, and I know now that we do strive to do better, to extend our hand to the stranger; to welcome newcomers, and to accept those who are different than us. And that is good. We need that.

Just pause to think about how well prepared we are to welcome:

- a man from a Pentacostal background waves his hands in the air and shouts halleloujah during the singing of “Spirit of Life”
- a beautifully bedecked woman in a flowered print dress, with matching high heels and purse -- 6’4” tall, and clearly transgender
- a person who speaks out of turn and can’t follow the hymns — who seems perhaps to be mentally ill
- a well-dressed couple — the man with an American flag on the lapel of his suit, and both carrying their Bibles with them
- a woman with a guide dog
- a homeless man who hasn’t bathed in a week

Perhaps such examples show something of the challenge before us; it is difficult to be open and welcoming to those who challenge us.

Rev. Marilyn J. Sewel's wrote:

So “radical hospitality” is a term that rolls easily off the tongue—to actually carry it out is a demanding undertaking. But we are not a department store, not a government agency, not an HMO—in all these places, one would expect to be received politely, as it were—served, as is our due. No, we are a church, and it is appropriate that we ask ourselves, what is the moral dimension of our hospitality, the moral dimension of our reception of others, of our solidarity with others, who may not look like us or move from the same assumptions or values? I’m not

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talking about being politically correct, or legalistic—I'm talking about hospitality as spiritual practice. I'm not talking about just opening the doors—I'm talking about opening the heart.

When I look at our world today, I see political rhetoric designed to increase the divide between liberals and conservatives, so that we have more and more trouble getting anything done.

Our congress, our government, by its very nature is, and always will be, full of political diversity. So what do we do? We engage in public campaigns designed not to bring us together to get to know our diversity, and to seek comfort in it, but we campaign in ways designed to motivate us to action against one-another. To consume our resources bickering and working against each other.

Such a world needs a welcoming practice, needs those who can demonstrate a commitment not just to tolerating our diversity, but to wanting it, to welcoming it, and celebrating it.

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or saw you naked and gave you clothes? Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of the human family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:38)

Our commitment to welcoming has to stay in front of us; diversity cannot become, as Rev Belletini said, “some sort of feel good slogan...” our world needs us to greet that stranger with invitation, celebration and eagerness.

When we seek to sustain in our lives and our communities a mindful, consistent effort not just to tolerate the diverse, but to welcome it, to engage the stranger, to invite those who differ from us into our homes and our lives, to demonstrate radical hospitality and grace, when we work for that practice, we open space where people get to know one-another, and that knowing helps us to overcome our fears and find ways to be together, not just on the common ground of what we share, but on the frontier of the ways in which we differ.

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Certainly what I saw at Lance's memorial stood as a powerful and moving example of what one man's welcoming practice could do to bring widely different people together, not just to tolerate or accept their differences, but to celebrate them. If that was the work of one man...truly our work together could be earth shattering. Extreme.

Like my Sunday mornings on the rock with a belly full of coffee and mush.

We all feel judgment and suspicion; and we all give in to it sometimes – so what if our instinct is to withdraw from the stranger, to gravitate to what we know, to distrust diversity?

Such instincts set the stage for us to explore a deep, meaningful spiritual practice of reaching out, despite those impulses. They provide us with an opportunity to consciously choose something else...to make a choice to extend an open invitation, and to practice making that choice over and over again.

Even if we didn't have findings like Putnam's or stories like Lance's to tell us that our practice would forge the relationships that make diversity more welcome in our world; we have the idea Jan suggested last week that our acts of kindness and generosity are their own reward.

So I think a mindful practice of engaging that which is different eagerly, welcoming diversity in the face of our instinct to pull away might just deepen our spirit, call us to the divine, and remind us to deeply value the inherent worth and dignity of ALL people.

A practice of calling each another to be more than tolerant, more than accepting – a practice of being kind, generous, hospitable and welcoming of diversity; a practice which reminds us to extend our hand to the stranger, to genuinely seek to know more about that which is different, to grow our knowledge of diversity with enthusiasm to celebrate our differences.

To me, such a practice would be an “Extreme Welcoming.”

References

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The Words Spoken At Lance's Memorial in January 2011

Lance Ashton was a very special man; each time he walked into this church his eyes would light up with joy - he loved this place. When we saw each other he would come and give me a hug that held nothing back. When I first got out of rehabilitation, walking with braces and an uncertain future, we shared a moment talking about our disabilities together. Lance and I agreed that there are things in life which we cannot change, even when they happen to us, that perhaps the best we can do is to strive to accept such things with as much grace as we can find, to seek joy in what we have, instead of lamenting what we lost. Lance was one of the people who inspired me to joy when trying to cope with loss. His presence brought love and hope that seemed contagious. I will miss him. I think the world will miss him.