

“Radical Hospitality”

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Unitarian Universalist Church
Kansas City, Missouri
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July 24, 2005

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?

That song asks the question at the core of radical hospitality. Will we open not just our homes, but our hearts to one another? To whom do we struggle to offer safe harbor?

The word 'hospitality' congers up images of the hospitality industry – warm, comfy beds, free local calls, continental breakfast and HBO.

While those things are nice, radical hospitality is not about tourism.

The word 'radical' implies 'extreme'. Pushing the limits. In "radical hospitality" it means nudging oneself beyond the comfort zone to welcome the stranger to our table – and into our hearts.

Most religions have some form of charge to their believers to practice radical hospitality.

Christians believe Jesus taught his followers to welcome the stranger into our midst. To treat each person we meet as the Divine made manifest in flesh.

Jesus taught his disciples that it is in the space between the stranger and the self that the divine is encountered.

He told them: "When I was thirsty, you gave me water; when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me."

When his disciples balked and said “when were you ever, thirsty and we gave you water, when were you ever hungry and we fed you, and when did we welcome you as a stranger?” Jesus replied: “What you do to the least of these [indicating the crowd that had gathered to hear them] you do unto me.”

Or, from a mystical point of view: we are all drops of water from the same eternal, infinite ocean. When we recognize that all forms of creation – trees, stones, rivers and people – are just different configurations of stardust – the same energy and matter in different forms – it may give us a more encompassing perspective on the surface differences among us.

A Humanist might say quite simply that there is inherent worth and dignity in all of humanity, and that our highest goal and aspiration is to respect and cherish each person.

This church does a phenomenal job of making people feel welcome. I know this from my personal experience. But also, one of the best indicators of a vibrant, welcoming church is a growth in membership. Our membership is growing by leaps and bounds. The exploring membership classes are swelling.

Radical hospitality is more than giving guests a warm welcome. It is more than growth in membership. It is an ongoing spiritual practice...looking beneath the surface differences and engaging with the essence of holiness that is the foundation of every person.

Like every spiritual practice it is meant to change you. If it doesn't change you, it is something less than spirituality.

The Quaker author, Parker Palmer talks about the problems religious communities have with practicing radical hospitality. He writes:

“...If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit, and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are [often] aimed at making the stranger “one of us.” The essence of hospitality – and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.”

The point of radical hospitality is not to convert anyone – not to try to make ‘them’ just like ‘us’. What is the risk, the danger in expanding ourselves to include people not like us?

What if they try to change us? What if we are being asked to change?

Part of the spiritual practice of radical hospitality is to learn to recognize our internal reactions to people who we consider ‘strangers’. To whom do we find it the hardest to extend hospitality? The answers for each of us are probably different.

We liberal religious people pride ourselves on being open and accepting. As an association, anyway, we are not there yet. As hard as we try, we are not quite living up to our ideals.

At this year's annual General Assembly of Congregations in Ft. Worth, Texas – where Unitarian Universalists from all over the country gather together for a long weekend - there were several incidents of racial discrimination.

Like a mirror held up to our communal face we need to look - even if we're saddened by what we see - especially because these stories have been picked up by the media. Maybe you already read about it in the Kansas City Star.

At the closing ceremony an usher tried to bar admission to a group of African American teenagers. The teens were Unitarian Universalist youth.

In response the UUA board issued an open letter in which they said:

“We have been disturbed by reports of other unfortunate incidents during General Assembly within our own Unitarian Universalist family, in which some UU youth of color were made to feel that they were not welcome. There was an incident outside the hall during the closing ceremonies at the Fort Worth General Assembly. Based on the reports of witnesses, the incident involved several UU youth of color, a UU adult who questioned their right to be there, provoking an angry response from the youth, a UU minister who intervened in support of the adult, and another white youth who defended the youth of color and verbally attacked the minister, who responded in like fashion with similar inflammatory language.

This was not the only incident. We have also heard that on several occasions in Fort Worth , white UUs assumed that UU youth of color were hotel service people and asked them to carry luggage or park cars.

We are troubled that some UUs may have treated other UUs as if they did not belong among us. We can and must do better.”

I am not totally surprised – but I am saddened that this is still happening in **our own** UU community – to **our** young people.

What does radical hospitality look like?

There is an old Chassidic story that comes to mind:

Deep in the forest, there was a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once thriving, things had now become so bad that there were only four monks and the abbot left, all over seventy. The monastery was clearly dying.

Despairing over the monastery’s decline, the abbot decided to visit a wise rabbi and seek his counsel. The rabbi welcomed the abbot and listened carefully to him. But, when the abbot finished his sad tale, the rabbi only shook his head and said, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone from the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to synagogue anymore."

The two men wept together. Then they read Torah and spoke of many deep things.

Eventually the abbot had to leave. As the two men embraced, the rabbi said, "I'm sorry I had no advice for you. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

The abbot returned to the monastery, He sadly told the monks, "The rabbi couldn't help, We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say was that the Messiah was one of us. I don't know what he meant."

The monks pondered. What *did* the rabbi mean? Is the Messiah *really* one of us?

The abbot maybe?

Or, Brother Thomas who is so clearly a holy man?

Surely *not* Brother Elred, who is too crotchety. But, when you come right down to it, in retrospect Brother Elred is always right about things.

Brother Phillip maybe. No, Phillip is so quiet and passive. Still, when you really need someone, Brother Phillip has a way of magically appearing.

Maybe the rabbi meant one of the visitors who come here from time to time. Has the Messiah been here and we didn't even know it? Or is he on his way?

Surely the rabbi didn't mean me! I'm just an ordinary person. ...But... what if he *did* mean me? Oh God, I am not the Messiah am I? I couldn't be that much for you, could I?

As the pondering continued, the monks began to treat each other deep respect, just in case one of them really was the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with respect, too. Just in case...

Occasionally hikers coming through the forest would visit the monastery, sometimes stopping to pray in the dilapidated chapel. They began to notice something strangely compelling about the monastery. For one thing, the monks radiated love and respect.

People began to make special trips to the forest, just to be in the presence of the monks. They brought their families and friends to show them that special place.

Some of the younger men began to talk to the old monks. And then one young man decided to take orders. And then another joined. And another. And another. Within a few years, the monastery was thriving again. Thanks to the rabbi's gift, it became a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

What would radical hospitality have looked like between the adults and the youth of color at General Assembly? Imagine if all parties involved instead treated one another with deep respect and love.

What would it look like in our community?

If we are to welcome “all souls” to join us we may have to change our ideas of what a Unitarian Universalist looks and acts like.

Is there room enough in our community and in our hearts for people of different ethnicities? People with disabilities? People with mental illness? Teenagers? Toddlers? Men and women imprisoned? People who vote differently than you do?

Can we warmly welcome and embrace the person with financial difficulties who struggles to make even a modest pledge?

What about people who use different religious language?

Here is the question: “Can we draw the circle wide enough to include people we may now consider ‘strangers’ without threatening the integrity of our community?”

Inviting people very different than ourselves can be frightening. What would it mean to re-envision our community? Does being receptive to strangers mean loss of our community’s identity?

Will we be changed in the process?

The answer is, Yes! And only for the better.

Especially if we can communicate clearly to others what it means to be a part of our community.

Catholic theologian Henry Nouwen says that confrontation is the other side of the coin of hospitality. Confrontation, not as it is understood as aggression, Nouwen means rather the willingness to step up and boldly show other people who we are. He writes:

"We are not hospitable when we leave our house to strangers and let them use it any way they want. An empty house is not a hospitable house...When we want to be really hospitable we not only have to receive strangers but also to confront them by unambiguous presence, showing our ideas, opinions and life styles clearly and distinctly. Receptivity without confrontation leads to bland neutrality...Confrontation without receptivity leads to aggression."

What do we as Unitarian Universalists stand for? What unites us as a church community? As a denomination? What is our unambiguous presence?

UU's tend to have a difficult time describing our religion to others. We've been known to challenge one another with creating what we call our "elevator speech". That is, if we are on the 12th floor in an elevator and someone asks us about Unitarian Universalism what do we say in the 45 seconds before we get to the lobby?

One thing we can learn from the incidents at GA is that our definition of ourselves needs to be open to changes. We need to expand our idea of what a UU looks like. Draw the circle a bit wider.

Someone very wise once told me to think of a church, or even our whole UU movement, as a river. It flows downhill through time. The membership at any given period sees only the part of the river that flows past our view.

We tend to forget all that brought the river to us and often neglect to think of those who will come into contact with it much farther down stream.

The people in this room are the stewards of the All Souls River right now. Together we help shape this church's future – as well as that of our denomination.

Our recently drafted vision statement declares that in the year 2015 we are a vibrant, **diverse**, caring community. Our actions right now can bend the river in that direction.

The words of A. Powell Davies come back to me:

Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny,

Living our lives between the briefness of the daylight and the dark.

Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!

Indeed!

Namaste.