

Come, Come Whoever You Are

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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Happy New Year! The month of January is named after the Roman god Janus, who is the god of thresholds and doorways. He is often depicted as having two faces, one looking backward to the old year and the other looking forward to the new, or one looking inward toward the interior of the building and the other looking outward. It is an appropriate time to consider hospitality and welcoming.

The Sufi poet Rumi says
Come, come whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
Come, yet again, come.

Last year at this time, Joan McDonald, our director of Religious Education, preached a sermon on radical hospitality. I didn't hear that sermon, but I know that radical hospitality is an idea that touches our deepest religious values. The First Principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, is just a phrase, just nice words on paper, until it is put into action in our church lives and in our other lives by our being open and welcoming to people of all stripes.

There is a particular poignancy to the fact that Joan preached that sermon on that topic a year ago, and it gives us a benchmark by which to measure the changes wrought by the past year at the Meeting House. Joan left us in the summer to devote more time to the care of her father and because her other job became more demanding. She was a faithful caregiver, and her father died of Alzheimer's a few days ago, and I'm sure Joan would appreciate some cards of support from us. Joan's departure coincided financially with a time of retrenchment and so it was not possible to replace her as a staff person.

She was a member of this covenanted community, she shared the road awhile with us, and now she has moved on as have others of us.

And since then, through the leadership of Naomi Turner, the volunteer arts-based effort called Beacon Youth Outreach has become the youth ministry of the Meeting House. But these fine kids and their parents who graced our sanctuary two weeks ago came in as strangers to this Meeting House. The Membership Committee and I have done what we can to extend to them the hand of welcome, but we will need support from everyone here.

Hospitality has a strong relation to growth in a church, but that is not the reason to

practice it. We practice hospitality because it is a core concept of our religion, it is how we live out our faith. In Christian teaching, Jesus maintained that how his followers treated the least and most vulnerable of people was how they were treating him. At one point, he envisioned a judgment day when he will reward the righteous for taking care of him; as a Universalist, I have a lot of problems with the idea of a judgment day, but I think the ethic that Jesus is preaching here is one that applies to all of us:

(Matthew 26, NRSV) 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

For a theist, this is the theological root of our First Principle. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person because every person has the divine in him or her. For non-theists, just the words “inherent worth and dignity” convey a similar ethic.

In The Epistle to the Hebrews, which was traditionally attributed to St. Paul, we find the following (13:1-2) “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.”

Now it is not necessary that we deem angels as supernatural beings. The Greek word in the passage is *Angellaw*, which simply means messenger. Any messenger, from any person. But I think the point of the passage is that indeed any person we entertain might be a messenger of God, or as Rumi says in the passage I will quote in a minute, a messenger from the beyond.

In the Jewish tradition, the essence of *mitzvah* is to do a favor for someone which can never be repaid. The paradigm example of this is seen in many Jewish funerals, where the mourners each put a shovelful of dirt on the coffin; thus the mourners participate in making sure that the deceased is properly buried according to law and custom, a favor the deceased can never repay. When we bestow benefits which cannot be repaid, we are operating out of pure and disinterested goodwill.

One of the areas of life in which people have honed their hospitality skills is that of the pilgrimage. The cockle shell on the cover of the order of service is a symbol of the pilgrimage made by thousands each year to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where legend says the relics of

St. James the brother of Jesus are interred. Over the centuries, whole villages devoted to hospitality have sprung up along the routes of this pilgrimage, and the iconic food served to the traveler is Coquille St. Jacques. The cockle of St. James. We'd call it the scallops.

We are all fellow pilgrims on a journey of discovery. We will find many similarities, and of course wide differences between us. Pilgrims have always come together and found out what they had in common and what were the differences. We join a covenanted community such as this, we agree to share the road awhile.

Hospitality, of course, has its risks. The guests may make off with the silverware, may trash the place, may insult the host or trample all over local sensibilities. But nobody said every angel was going to behave always like an angel.

Rumi deals with this in another poem called "The Guest House":

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the sham, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Come, come, whoever you are. To be true to our religious principles, we must open ourselves not only to the one who is like us, but to the one who is different.

The point I want to underscore here is that hospitality often involves making yourself uncomfortable. To reach out to someone who is very different from yourself is not easy. It is the ability to reach out to the different other that distinguishes a covenanted community from a clubhouse. Let me repeat that, it is the ability to reach out to the different other that distinguishes a covenanted community from a clubhouse.

This is well illustrated by Gail Geisenhainer, now a UU minister, as she describes her

attempts to connect with her tiny UU church in Maine in the 1980s. We heard in the selection I read before how she as a lesbian was expecting to be rejected but found herself accepted. But that is not the end of the story. In the sermon she goes on to describe a little bump in the road she soon encountered¹.

Please don't think the transition was smooth or swift. These were not imaginary super-heroes, these were human beings. And this was in the mid 1980's. During the worship service on my second or third Sunday, a woman stood during Joys and Concerns to announce that all homosexuals had AIDS, all homosexuals were deviants who could not be trusted with children, public health or civil society. All homosexuals should be quarantined; packed off to work camps to provide useful labor for society and keep their filthy life style and deadly diseases to themselves.

As the member spoke I slowly sat upright from my customary slouch. I tucked in my arms, looked furtively around to see who might be glaring in my direction, and I tried to remember if I had parked my car facing in or out in the parking lot. In its journey of covenant, this congregation had just stumbled onto an important cross-road. But as Joys and Concerns unfolded not one person made reference to the call to quarantine all homosexuals. The pulpit that morning was ably filled by a student from the local seminary. At the end of the sharing, the seminarian made a brief comment to ensure (sic) us that not all the sentiments voiced this morning represented the whole congregation, and that was that!

Now I was at a cross-road. Sure thing I left that week right after service. But what about next Sunday? Would I go back? Why on earth would I go back? That would be, well, you fill in the word, going back would be what? , dangerous, stupid, fool hardy, looking for trouble, probably hurtful, but back I went. I was in the throes of learning my first lessons of being in covenant with a congregation. When we covenant to walk together through all that life brings, it means when things get ugly, we don't walk away. Oh, how we may want to walk away! But our covenants call us to abide and work things through.

Covenant is what we call the glue that holds us together, but Gail wasn't yet a part of the

¹Gail's sermon "We Who Believe In Freedom Cannot Rest" is at <http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2006/towardright/124831.shtml>

covenant. She had experienced some hospitality from the church and that made her feel like giving it another try. But it was a specific very small act that actually turned it for her. Let her describe how she felt as she left the church the Sunday the woman spoke about “homosexuals.”

At the time, what I remember most is the sensation of holding my breath as I hurried out during the postlude. I ducked my head, avoided eye contact, spoke to no one as though the shame were mine. There was a man in the foyer between me and the exit door. I quickly glanced up to his face, silently pleading for him to let me pass without more pain. He smiled, held the door open gently for me, speaking softly, he said, "See you next week?"

My head snapped up. "Excuse me," I muttered. Surely I had not heard him correctly? He gently repeated, "See you next week?"

A little act, a little gesture. But this man knew what he was doing. Gail was the only lesbian who was attending that church, and the church was struggling to make concrete its status as a welcoming congregation. She goes on to describe in detail what the gesture meant to her:

Was he mad? Was he impaired? Had he not just heard what that woman said? "See you next week?" It was at once a question and an invitation. Surely, I thought as I scrambled to leave the parking lot, surely it was an invitation to madness, but for one thing. The man's voice, his soft smile, gentle words, direct eye contact, ours was an "I—Thou" encounter. The very thing I'd been seeking.

In the throes of awful moments, in the slap of insult, the breaking through realizations of injustice, disrespect, unkindness, hatred and worse, there is a way to detect if we are off course or on course. In these terrible moments all sense of movement stops. Instinctively, some of us begin to hold our breath. We become hyper alert to details, the sense of "other" and our sense of "apartness."

“... Then the fellow at the door said, "See you next week?" At once a question and an invitation. At once an acceptance of the reality I might not come back. "See you next week?" I exhaled. The salvific power of breathing. My first lesson on the Beloved Community where we walk together, though all that life brings. Just enough to keep us in motion, to keep us in conversation.”

That little gesture of that man kept Gail in relationship with that church and she has gone on to become one of our most powerful and eloquent ministers, serving churches in Vero Beach Florida and now in Ann Arbor Michigan.

Come, come whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper. Come, let us share the road awhile, let us walk together in this pilgrimage of life, let us get to know one another, to see the divine spark in each other. If we are serious about this invitation, it will take us out of our comfort zone. Here are some New Year's resolutions: Let us resolve think about what it means to be a truly open community, versus a clubhouse where it is assumed that everyone knows everyone else. Let us resolve to wear our nametags. When we use the microphone in talkback, let us resolve to say our names distinctly. When we see someone we don't recognize, instead of avoiding them let us resolve make a beeline for them at social hour. Let us resolve to try to get to know a few more people each week, to remember their names, to welcome them.

What, after all, are we here for? We are here to build the beloved community. We are here to be in relation. Will Rogers said there were no strangers in his life, only friends he hadn't met yet. In this New Year, let us resolve, let us commit ourselves to practice hospitality in ways large and small, all the time, in our church life and in life outside of church. Come, come, whoever you are, come yet again come. See you next week?
Amen.

Readings

Song: It's Pleasure to Know You by Carl Williams

Chorus:

It's a pleasure to know you,
A pleasure to see you smile
A comfort to know we'll share the road awhile
Pleasure is fleeting, and comforts are far between
It's a pleasure to know you and the comfort you bring.

1. I came to your city after I'd left my home
And I was a stranger, dressed up in stranger's clothes
Favors I needed, but charity's out of style--
And rare as the beauty in the face of a trusting child.

2. Now they say life's a journey, a highway from birth to death
Mapped in despair, and traveled in hopelessness.
Well they may believe it, but just between you and me

The trick to the travelin' is all in the company.

3. Now lovers may leave you, lovers may turn away.
Children may scorn you--you know that they will someday,
Seasons are fickle, and fate isn't known as kind
But friendship's the diamond,
And trouble's the diamond mine.

Rev. Gail Geisenhainer sermon, "We Who Believe In Freedom Cannot Rest" GA St. Louis 2006

I was forthrightly evangelized into Unitarian Universalism. I was 38 years old, living in Maine, driving a snow-plow for a living and feeling very sorry for myself when a friend invited me to his church. He said it was different. I rudely refused. I cursed his church. "All blank-ing churches are the same," I informed him, "they say they're open—but they don't want queer folk. To Heck with church!" My friend, persisted. He knew his church was different. He told me his church cared about people, embraced diverse families, and worked to make a better world. He assured me I could come and not have to hide any elements of who I was. So I went. Oh, I went alright.

And I dressed sooooo, carefully for my first Sunday visit. I spiked my short hair straight up into the air. I dug out my heaviest, oldest work boots, the ones with the chain saw cut that exposed the steel toe. I got my torn blue jeans and my leather jacket. There would be not a shred of ambiguity this Sunday morning. They would embrace me in my full Amazon glory, or they could fry ice. I carefully arranged my outfit so it would highlight the rock hard chip I carried on my shoulder, I bundled up every shred of pain and hurt and betrayal I had harbored from every other religious experience in my life, and I lumbered into that tiny meetinghouse on the coast of Maine.

Blue jeans and boots. Leather jacket, spiked hair and belligerent attitude. I accepted my friend's invitation and I went to his church. I expected the gray-haired ladies in the foyer to step back in fear. That would have been familiar. Instead, they stepped forward, offered me a bulletin, a newsletter and invited me to stay for coffee. It was so... odd! They never even flinched!

They called me "dear." But they pronounced it "dee-ah." "Stay for coffee, dear."

I stayed for coffee. I stayed for Unitarian Universalism. Over time, the good folks of that church loved up the scattered parts of me and guided me from shattered to whole; from outcast to

beloved among many. And those folks listened to me. I and my life partner became their poster-children for the brand new Welcoming Congregation program. And they went on to provide important local pastoral and legislative ministries to gay folks in Down East Maine. We walked together and we helped each other to grow.