

Gathering Guests At Our Table: Practicing Radical Hospitality
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A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

It is good to be with you this morning. I had prepared a sermon for December 21, the fourth Sunday in Advent, but we got snowed out. I broke my ankle just after Christmas, so I haven't seen much of you. The sermon I was going to deliver was entitled "Expecting Joy". Since some of the material was relevant to today's topic, I have integrated that part into this morning's sermon.

As you know, this morning we are gathering the *Guest at Your Table* boxes, and perhaps more importantly, the donations they contain for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Our monetary contributions and membership in the Service Committee help to put our Unitarian Universalist values into action in those parts of the world where they are needed most. Thank you for your generosity.

The Worship Committee decided that it would be good to focus on the Unitarian Universalist principles in some of our worship services between January and June this year. So I ordered some bookmarks which have the principles and sources printed on them, for your easy reference. If you would like to take one home with you, that would be great. Today I am going to be focusing on the first principle which we covenant to affirm and promote: *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*. There have been a number of streams which have flowed together to create this morning's celebration of worship.

We just celebrated the 80th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for whom there is a holiday tomorrow. Many groups are seeing this as a great opportunity to have a *Day of Service* in his honor, with clothing and food drives to support people in need. You may want to think about how you will spend this day, in a way that honors the spirit of Dr. King. One thing I

did was to read the book Been In The Storm So Long, a collection of essays by African American writers published by the UUA. A few of the readings this morning were taken from that book.

Women Transcending Boundaries (WTB) is going to have a speaker in March, Sandra Lane, who wrote the book Why Are Our Babies Dying? : Pregnancy, Birth, and Death in America. Since I've been laid up with my broken ankle, I had time to read this book, much of which is based on her research in Syracuse. As the author writes:

The conceptual framework for this work is structural violence, a theory elaborated by Galtung and further defined by Weigert, as "preventable harm or damage...where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not meaningful to search for the actor(s)." "Structural violence emerges from the unequal distribution of power and resources or, in other words, is said to be built into the structure(s)" Structural violence encompasses institutional racism, relative deprivation in food or health care, disease-ridden environments, and stigmatizing social norms.

This book was a fascinating read. It was well-researched and had ample graphs and tables, but it was accessible. The author made a conscious decision to make it easy for community members to read, rather than writing it in a way that would limit it to academia. I am grateful for her act of hospitality.

WTB has also been involved in supporting *Mothers Against Gun Violence*, joining in vigils at the places where people have been shot and killed. On the list-serve for WTB someone commented that there seem to have been a lot of violent deaths recently. As important as it is to mark each one with a vigil, she asked if there isn't something we can do to help prevent the violent deaths from occurring, and she made some suggestions. I wrote back to encourage her.

It reminded me of a story about a village near a river. When the villagers were washing their clothes in the river, they noticed a baby floating in the water. Some of them quickly jumped in and saved the baby and took care

of it. The following day, there were two babies floating in the river, and they also were saved and cared for. In the following days, more and more babies were seen in the river and saved. Finally one woman spoke up and said, "I wonder why all these babies are floating in the river; maybe we should go upstream and investigate." So, they formed an exploratory party, discovered why the infants were being thrown in the river, and addressed the problem at its source. It is important that we help to serve those in need, but it is also important that we confront the structures that contribute to violence in order to help create change for the good of all.

When I thought about gathering the Guest at Your Table donations this morning, and the focus on the first principle, *affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, I envisioned actually gathering guests at our table. I thought that would be pretty radical, for people who have been so shy about inviting friends to come, or even talking about their church. So, I decided to entitle this morning's sermon: "Gathering Guests At Our Table: Practicing Radical Hospitality". I knew I had heard the term "radical hospitality" before, so I decided to *google* it. There were multiple hits, some of them Christian, and at least two of them Unitarian Universalist. I learned that the term seems to originate from the book ***Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love***, by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Gollins Pratt. They write:

When we speak of hospitality we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. Each of us makes choices about who will and who will not be included in our lives.... Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it.... All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn't mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.... But calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell us the whole truth about hospitality either. A moral issue can become bogged down in legalisms, and hospitality is no legalistic ethical issue. It is instead a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding

yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice and a path to a deeper spirituality.

In other words, hospitality is not only a way of reaching out and helping others, but it is also a great benefit to the one practicing hospitality.

One of the Unitarian Universalist entries on *radical hospitality* was from a blog, which cautioned that we may *think* that we are being hospitable, but we need to examine everything we do or say to see how welcoming we really are. Do we have so many fundraising activities that people are put off, thinking that ours is an unstable group, or that it will cost a lot to be a member? Do we use jargon which suggests that we don't welcome people who aren't already *in the know*? Do we tend to sit with people we know in the pews, and to chat with people we know at coffee hour? When people first come into our church, is it welcoming, or cluttered? Is it easy to find the restroom? Does someone personally invite a visitor to come to fellowship after the service, and make sure they are well taken care of and connect with others? Do we remember what it was like when we first entered a new place?

Another entry I came upon when I was researching *radical hospitality*, was a web site for Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker houses which are found in many large cities. Members of the houses share their lives with others, who may not have *anything*, as equals, realizing that all are a part of the body of Christ. While we might not have that particular belief here, we *do* believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and that we are *all* on an interdependent web of existence.

While not Catholic Worker houses, the Oxford Street Inn in Syracuse and Unity Acres, up the road in Orwell, extend hospitality to people who may not have anywhere else to go, especially alcoholics in the case of Unity Acres. When I was working in Syracuse for an agency which provided social services and required participants to buy into a set of personalized

goals, there was some feeling that a place like the Oxford Street Inn let people off too easy. The Inn accepted people as they were, homeless and sometimes drinking outside of the Inn. Some outside the Inn felt that people there were being enabled not to change. But from the perspective of hospitality in a spiritual sense, perhaps one needs to welcome and accept people as they are, before they can even dream of changing. And whether or not they change, they are still worthy of being welcomed, even as we would want to be welcomed by fellow human beings. And, reaching out with hospitality can be experienced as reward in itself, whether or not it leads to change. When we can let go of the need to change others, we can experience true hospitality.

When I was exploring the topic *Expecting Joy* in anticipation of Christmas, I thought a lot about birth and children. Birth is always a time of expectation- a woman who is pregnant is said to be “expecting”. No matter how difficult the pregnancy and childbirth is, there is a hope, even an expectation, of the birth of a healthy child. The parents, and those around them, witness the miracle of growth and birth, and rejoice at the beautiful new form with the sparkle in its eyes.

Sometimes our hopes and expectations are challenged, but there is still usually love, and that love helps us overcome many obstacles. So we are terribly upset when a child is not treated with love: we might see a child being yelled at and grabbed by an irate parent in the grocery store; we read about a baby, placenta still attached, found in a dumpster- discarded like a piece of rubbish; we read about a toddler who was beaten to death, after enduring a living hell of abuse at the hands of her mother and her mother’s boyfriend; or we read about an eleven year old girl who died in her home, after living there surrounded by cats who were better cared for and fed than she was. Our hearts go out to the children, and to their parents and caregivers, some of whom are children themselves, and all of whom have suffered great devastation and loss.

Raising children is a huge task, and it has been said that *it takes a village*

to raise a child. In this church, when we have a child naming and parent dedication ceremony, we covenant to be there for the children and their parents. We are *all* responsible for helping to support the parents and the children as the children grow. This is perhaps especially important to remember as we are going through a transition in our Religious Education program. It is up to *all* of us to help instill the values of this church in the next generation, at least in the way we interact with the children.

When I was pregnant, one of my friends in *Siddha Yoga* who had given birth a few years earlier said, “Enjoy every moment.” I replied, “sure”. And she said with emphasis, “every moment”. She was making the point that, much as we anticipate the joy of the birth of a baby, as magical as that birth is, once that child has entered our life, life will never be the same again. I think she was also stressing the importance of learning to be present in the moment, even when outside forces work to move us off center. It is easier to practice meditation and being present in the moment when a baby isn’t dependent upon us; and it is very helpful to have that in our repertoire when a baby *is* present.

When I was staying in the *ashram*, or meditation center, in India for an extended time, I sang in the Christmas choir. The first year Baba Muktananda, the *guru*, was still alive. He directed the choir using a pencil as a baton, smiling playfully. The words of the Christmas carols took on new meaning for me, in the context of the *ashram*. I was especially struck by the phrase, “now in flesh appearing.” It seemed to me to be quite possible that God appears in human form for the benefit of his devotees. I felt the joy of Christmas in much deeper and more personal ways than I had previously.

I saw a documentary recently of the Dalai Lama, and it described the atrocities which had befallen the Tibetan people. And yet the interview with the Dalai Lama showed him to be smiling playfully and totally forgiving of the Chinese government. This lightness, playfulness, and lack of any attachment to sorrow seems to be characteristic of great spiritual teachers.

As Jesus himself is attributed to have said, *it is not enough that you love those who love you, you must also love your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you.*

My own belief is that Jesus became a great spiritual teacher as well as a social activist working for justice and promoting love. I don't believe that he was the only great spiritual teacher of that caliber. My experience with a *guru* leads me to place Jesus in that category. So, I'd like to explain what a *guru* is and why I think of Jesus in that way.

The word *guru* comes from the *Sanskrit* roots *gu*, meaning darkness, and *ru*, meaning light. So the *guru* is one who can lead us from the darkness of ignorance of our true Self to the light of Self knowledge. The *Guru* has been described as the *grace bestowing power of God*. The *Guru* is a force, rather than an individual, but takes on the form of an individual so that we can relate to it. The *guru* has a special role - the ability, and the responsibility, to awaken the dormant spark of divinity within each seeker, and to guide them on a spiritual path.

For this reason, I see Jesus as one among many great *gurus* who have been born to serve throughout the ages. There is one *Guru* with a capital G, one grace bestowing power of God, which is beyond time and place. But this power appears in different forms, depending on the needs in various times and places. The goal is to be accessible to all true seekers.

As the first principle of Unitarian Universalism says: *We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*. In other words, each of us contains the divine spark; in many people it needs to be awakened and nurtured. We may need a guru, or a spiritual teacher, to awaken the spark within us, but we need to nurture that spark ourselves, and support each other in doing that. Regular spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer can help to nurture that divine spark.

Jesus is reported to have said, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. We

sometimes struggle to love our neighbors, or to see the inherent worth and dignity in them. We forget that we need to love ourselves, and to see ourselves as having inherent worth and dignity. To do so is not to be self-centered or selfish, but is to be centered in the true Self. As Swami Muktananda taught, *God dwells within you, as you. See God in each other.* When we see God within ourselves, we will see that Great Spirit everywhere and in everyone. It is worth the effort to nurture that divine spark within ourselves to help transform our world into the Beloved Community we want it to be. We seek, as our Affirmation of Faith states: *to the end that all souls will grow into harmony with the Divine.* We believe this is possible.

Christmas was a reminder to us of the celebration of joy we experience whenever a baby is born. It is the birth of innocence and hope. It is the birth of possibility and change. It is also the birth of vulnerability and the dawning of our own responsibility to care for the new life - to make sure it has an hospitable welcome, whether in a humble stable or a lavish home; to be sure it has enough healthy food to eat; to ensure adequate clean water for drinking and bathing; to ensure all the rights spelled out in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*. We are far from being able to ensure that for all the children born in the United States, let alone all those in the world. And yet that is our task, to work for justice throughout the world for those who are most vulnerable.

Many of us are excited at the prospect and promise of a new President and a new administration in our country. There is a groundswell for “change we can believe in.” And yet, much as one leader can do to change the face of our lives, a leader is just as effective as those who are convinced to follow his or her leadership. The Obama transition team has been soliciting our input in regard to what is most important to us. May we be involved in supporting the leadership, whether in our country, state, locality, or church, by sharing our ideas and encouraging our leaders. It can be lonely at the top. May our hearts overflow with generosity, and may we reach out with hospitality, in whatever small ways we can, to all

who may benefit from our help.

Sometimes it is simple things that take almost no effort which are meaningful to others, like a *thank-you* or a smile. When I was growing up, my mother would sometimes ask me, *Why aren't you smiling? It's so nice to see you smile.* And I would feel, *sometimes I just don't feel like smiling.* Throughout the years people have commented on my smile and how much they like it. But It was only recently that I realized how important it is. An alto in the Syracuse Community Choir approached me during the break at a rehearsal, and said she could see me across the room during practice, and that my smile made her happy. Observing the Dalai Lama, and reading a book by Thich Nhat Hanh, Being Peace , I realized what a spiritual practice and act of hospitality smiling can be, even when we don't feel like smiling. I have been trying one of the meditations in the book, and would recommend it to you. It goes:

Breathing in, I calm body and mind.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment
I know this is the only moment.

My experience of this has been that when I breathe in, thinking about calming my body and mind, I actually feel calmer. When I breathe out, actually smiling, I feel delighted. When I breathe in dwelling in the present moment, I feel that I really am in the present moment, and if other thoughts come up, I discard them. The last one has been a bit harder- *I know this is the only moment.* My mind has a tendency to want to move on to breathing in and calming body and mind, and I have to make the effort to stay in the moment, realizing that the present moment *is* all there really is. Once we get used to this meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh has abbreviated it as: "Calming, Smiling, Present moment, Only moment." And he adds, "I hope you will try it."

I would like to close with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh which I find particularly meaningful in light of this morning's discussion:.

Children understand very well that in each woman, in each

man, there is a capacity of waking up, of understanding and of loving. Many children have told me that they cannot show me anyone who does not have this capacity. Some people allow it to develop, and some do not, but everyone has it. This capacity of waking up, of being aware of what is going on in your feelings, in your body, in your perceptions, in the world, is called Buddha nature, the capacity of understanding and loving. Since the baby of that Buddha is in us, we should give him or her a chance. Smiling is very important. If we are not able to smile, then the world will not have peace. It is not by going out for a demonstration against nuclear missiles that we can bring about peace. It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, and being peace that we can make peace. (pp 11-12)

May it be so.