



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Practicing Our Welcome"

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One day I stopped by the grocery store on my way home. I was in something of a hurry and I didn't need much, so I strode up to the door without pausing to select a cart...and then I stood there. The door didn't open. I darn near walked right into it. The electric eye didn't see me. Was it my angle of approach? My speed? A glitch in the system? I stood there, looking at the door, dumbfounded. Mere seconds later someone else walked up, the door opened for them, and I proceeded inside after them.

It was the strangest feeling, that sense of invisibility I felt. Literally invisible - whatever sensor was supposed to open the door for people who approached just...didn't sense me. The door remained shut.

Now say what you will about invisibility as a superpower, and I suppose it certainly could have its uses, but that experience made me think differently about what it is to be unseen in the world. To be unnoticed. And especially, to be unnoticed when others around you ARE being noticed...and welcomed inside.

Today we welcomed our new members, which is one of my favorite things to do. It means that so many things have gone well - a person has found us, they have come to worship, to classes, they've toured the building and the grounds and they've met the people (that's us!) and they've said, "Yes" to all of it.

And that's not always easy to do! I'd like to ask each of you to remember, if you can, your first experience of coming to a Unitarian Universalist church. If you

were raised UU, think about the first time you can remember going to something new within your UU congregation - a new class, maybe, a new small group ministry or a new social event you'd not attended before. Think about your first time and think about that automatically-opening door. How welcome did you feel? What was the thing that made you feel as though you belonged right where you were?

I'll tell you about mine. The first time I went to my home congregation, in Columbia, MD, I wanted to come in and simply observe. I did get a nametag, and afterward I definitely put my name on the list to receive emails from the congregation - but I came into the sanctuary right before the service began and I left as soon as it ended. Part of this was because I was in tears by then. For me, my moment of belonging was seeing a woman leading the service. I knew intellectually that there were many traditions where women could be ordained ministers, but I'd never sat in a worship service where that was the case, and had my heart touched that deeply. I couldn't tell you exactly what the sermon was, or any of the readings. But I can tell you what I felt: a sense of relief. An "aha!" moment of hearing, seeing, and feeling my own struggles with theology, community, and meaning-making shared publicly - affirmed.

As you all think about whatever that moment was for you, I'll invite you to consider something else, also. What about the first time when you were in your UU community - whether here or elsewhere - where you felt unwelcome? Was there a sermon on a topic that felt not just irrelevant to you, but downright off-putting? Was there a special program announced that you felt was not aligned with your values? Maybe it was just a time when people weren't particularly nice to you at coffee hour, or a time when people kept asking if you were new even if you'd been attending for weeks or months.

When we think about what makes us a welcoming congregation - in the general sense, not just the "welcoming congregation" certification that we have for being an LGBTQIA+ affirming place (though that is very important too!) - when we think about how we welcome, we have to think about both

aspects of finding a place to belong. What it feels like when it is going well - and what it feels like when it isn't.

Not out of any sense of trying to be all things to all people - we cannot be, and any attempt to do so will likely wind up feeling more shallow, less genuine, and less affecting than if we simply live our values. The reason to consider when we feel welcome and when we don't is two-fold: One, it helps us gain empathy - we can be more open to the experiences of others if they share that something we did or said felt less than welcoming. Two, it releases us from the pressure of perfection. We are simply not going to be welcoming to every person every time. If we let ourselves know that, up front, and consider it non-defensively, then we'll be open to real heart-expanding growth and learning. And perhaps if we allow ourselves to stop expecting to give perfectly, then we can allow ourselves to stop expecting to receive perfectly - in welcome or in anything at all.

Thinking about doing the work of welcome inclusively, open-heartedly, and imperfectly brings us back to today's reading. The Rev. Soto writes,

"You are the oasis. You are the hospital for broken hearts. Whatever it is that keeps you shy, reserved, appropriate in telling where it is that folks can belong and grow back their injured hearts, is worth a challenge. Grow unashamed at your own healing and connection. Grow proud of your diligence in keeping mutually dependent promises. Grow affectionate and supportive toward your community, even though it is imperfect. But most of all, be foolish for love, tender-hearted for love, and bold for love."

Your imperfect community - that you love. I love this poem, this blessing, because it invites us to be evangelists. Now that is a word that may feel

unwelcoming to some of you! Let me explain what I mean by that: I think many people are leery of the idea of “evangelization” because of its association with certain sects or groups. But the etymology, the root meaning of “evangelist” is “bringer of good news.” If I’m excited about something - a book I’m reading, a TV show I’m watching, or a group I’m a part of - I tend to share that excitement. (Hello, have you stood near me when I’ve recently read a Becky Chambers book?!) I want people to be excited about Unitarian Universalism. I want people to share things that excite them about being here, I want people to invite their friends they think might also find a sense of welcome and belonging here. Now I think we sometimes conflate “evangelizing” with “proselytizing” and that is not something I want to encourage! Proselytizing comes from root words meaning literally “one who has come over.” Proselytizing is about converting people to your way of thinking/being/doing. Evangelizing is sharing your joy about your way of thinking/being/doing.

The truth of the matter is that we are a religious tradition that mostly grows because adults - who are raised in other faith traditions or in no faith tradition at all - find us for one reason or another. We welcome new people - like our new members today - and that is principally how we grow.

There is a metaphor that I like to use to talk about Unitarian Universalism - we are like a rich and beautiful island with a broad sandy beach. Many people wash up on our shores - they are tossed about on the waves of unhappy childhood faith experiences, judgemental elders in different parts of their lives, lived experience of religious trauma and other trauma, and feeling like an outsider even as they earnestly search for truth and meaning. And of course, what people who wash up safely on the shore feel after a time in the storm is an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude. But after a time, it is my hope that our communities inspire us all to do more. To pick ourselves up off the beach of our initial safety, and to move into the interior. To join with the others there in finding and making food, lodging - security and community. That’s radical, real welcome - not just finding the safety of the shore of Unitarian Universalism but finding a whole community of Unitarian Universalists ready

to invite you in, ready to help feed you body and soul, so that you can keep welcoming in the others who find their way here from the storms of their own passage.

This is the bold love that our reading calls us to.
“Boldly, you must hang your light. Neon,
buzzing, bright. And do not be chagrined when
your lights blinks. It is a silent song of yes, you,
you are welcome here. Boldly, give your love
and arrive at your joy.”

When you give welcome, you receive joy.
We welcome you. We rejoice with you. We invite you into the work of this
community, and of the larger work of the community of Unitarian
Universalism. Together, we will be the oasis. It’s not going to be perfect, but it’s
going to be pretty amazing.