



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Where Is Our Welcome?"

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In 2017, I was fortunate enough to fly to visit a close friend of mine in the Philippines. For this very long plane journey I had one stopover, in Beijing. I had never been to China - I still don't claim that I have visited, because I don't think it counts if you don't ever leave the airport - and I worried about being able to find my way. And it was more than a little nerve-wracking. For the first time I was in a place full of signs and symbols - and most of them were ones I did not recognize. Not just ones I couldn't read... I've certainly been in places where I saw signs in a language I don't speak or don't speak well, like Spanish, but the alphabets are the same and I can sound things out with a phrase book or some knowledge of shared languages. But written Chinese is indecipherable to me, not even to be able to describe or sound out, and the pictograms that were used to aid travelers from other countries were even strange to me, as they were based in other cultures and understandings. Now the Beijing airport is huge and serves travelers from many countries, so I did not have any real difficulty moving from one plane to the next - no, mostly what I experienced was discomfort, a kind of displacement from my usual reality, the real and physical reminder that there are whole realms of human experience that are entirely unknown to me.

"We, who believe that revelation is not sealed, are writing sacred texts with our lives, with our smallest actions."

When I think of small acts of welcoming, I think of things like holding doors for people, or visiting a place for the first time and finding that it has plenty of signs to help newcomers figure out where to go. Of course there are things

that I find welcoming - like an abundance of signs in a language that I can read - that others would not find welcoming, an echo of my own experience in that Beijing airport.

“Our willingness to be invitational contributes volumes to this sacred, living text. Our willingness to extend welcome—seeing the humanity and divinity in another, honoring their culture, identities, stories, and deeply held truths—is part of what it means to embody this faith.”

The fact of the matter is that no matter how hard we try to be welcoming - to learn more deeply about what welcome can be, to inform ourselves of best practices when welcoming others, examining our own preconceived notions about what may feel welcoming and what might not - we are not going to get it right 100% of the time. So I would add to the Rev. Alicia Forde’s wise words from our reading, our willingness to be invitational and uncomfortable contributes volumes to this sacred, living text.

Let’s talk about the living text that our reading even comes from. It’s a 15-page PDF available from the UUA titled “[Multicultural Welcome: A Resource for Greeters in Unitarian Universalist Congregations.](#)” It’s wonderful that we have this resource! It’s wonderful that we understand that we need this resource! And I’ve just done two things in this very paragraph that might feel unwelcoming or confusing. For a newcomer, the acronym “UUA” might not mean anything. (It means “Unitarian Universalist Association.”) Unitarian Universalists have a love of acronyms, and it’s good practice of welcome - as well as of writing - to spell out what an acronym means each time one is used. So I’ll also point out that “PDF” means “portable document format” though in this instance the acronym itself is generally understood in common usage. But the unwelcoming thing there is that it’s available as an electronic file - and not as a print one, unless you choose to print it out. Not everyone has access to the internet, or to the devices needed to read this document.

We put a lot of thought into being welcoming - we have print orders of service, we have slides here on the monitor up front, we have the Zoom option

available for those not able to attend in person, we have hymnals available, we have assistive listening devices, we have friendly faces at the welcome desk (and all around!). We have a Soul Work cart in the back as we try to live into the truth that different people have different ways to learn, to feel comfortable, to take in information, to calm down. And, we don't produce large print copies of the order of service, we don't have American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, we don't have pre-set places for wheelchairs, instead relying on ushers and attendees weekly to move chairs around when there is a need.

Of course we've heard the phrase "we can't be all things to all people." And that's entirely true. But I think sometimes this is shorthanded into a second, implied statement: "So we shouldn't even try." Again, I'd say we should absolutely try our best, knowing we'll fail. We - and the vast majority of UU congregations and many other congregations of many other faiths - cannot afford an ASL interpreter weekly. But we can consider planning to include one for some events where it might be more likely to be needed, or specifically requested. We could print a few large-print orders of service each week. We could arrange the chairs with a few deliberate cut-outs for wheelchairs and other assistive devices. Our tech team thinks about accessibility, which is a form of welcome. Our worship team does too. Our staff does, and I try to consider this in every decision.

And we're never going to get it 100% right.

"Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're 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.

[...]

Be grateful for whoever comes,

because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.”

This being human is a guest house - a [beloved verse by Rumi](#) that served as our chalice lighting - and it's a great way to think about the discomfort that being truly welcoming sometimes means. It also gives us a way to think about not getting too caught up in not getting our welcome right but in getting our welcome active and ready to learn, ready to laugh at its own mistakes and still work towards improving.

And Rumi's poem asks us to think about the spiritual inner work of welcome, too. Because it's about more than just making sure that our sanctuary is welcoming to a newcomer to our community - although that is so very important! It is also about making our hearts ready to listen and learn when something feels unwelcoming to us, when we learn a hard lesson at the news of someone else's feelings of unwelcome.

I haven't talked about it yet but today's sermon was won in our Auction Sermon Raffle by our beloved Board Secretary, Leslie Johnston! And you might even remember that last year, she invited the Rev. Cindy Terlazzo - also through a sermon won at auction - to reflect on the same topic: "How welcoming are we, really?" When I talked to her about it, she also wanted me to consider the very real fact that we are the faith tradition with the most attrition - the most children and youth raised in our UU congregations that then leave and do not return to membership in a UU congregation later in life.

Now I'll be very up front: I don't know how to solve this problem, how to raise UU children and youth that will more often than not grow into UU adults and elders. If I did know, I'd definitely go into business as a consultant and sell that solution to every UU congregation! And of course, there isn't **A** solution. There are many ways to consider this, to consider what welcome means when we are always trying to consider the newcomer and the people who have been here since birth are feeling perhaps unconsidered.

Ours is a faith tradition that many come to as adults, myself included. I have talked about this before and have even used my favorite analogy which I'll use again: consider Unitarian Universalism as a beautiful island, surrounded by often-stormy seas. When there is a powerful storm on the sea, it can sometimes wash up people on our shores - perhaps the storm is a harmful faith tradition in their family of origin, perhaps the storm is a crisis in their personal or professional life, perhaps the storm is a building sense of disillusionment or disaster in the world or society at large. When a newcomer arrives on our island, at first they just want to rest. It feels welcoming enough just to be out of the storm! But eventually other needs arise - water, food, shelter, etc. And in this analogy, the members of the congregation who were already here - were already on the island - when the latest storm washed up its survivors on our shores are in charge of offering to help meet those needs. We take them off the shore and into the deeper parts of the island, where we have worked together on the nourishing parts that our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls cry out for when the crisis is past.

But what about the children born on this island? While they are not ignorant of the storms - they see the angry clouds, they help the people off the shore - their experience of both storm and calm is very different from those washed up here. If all the resources - the time and attention and care - on the island are going to helping the people washed up on the shore, then the ones who have never left the island might feel a wanting, an unnamed certainty that there is more nourishment that might be available, but it's not on offer here. Eventually a boat comes - storm-tossing isn't the ONLY way that people find us, of course! - and the children of the island decide to seek that nourishment elsewhere.

We are never going to get welcome 100% correct. And we are never going to get 100% "retention" (ugh) of our children and young people. Would we want to, honestly? If we honor the act of seeking as sacred, if "We, who believe that revelation is not sealed, are writing sacred texts with our lives, with our smallest actions," then we know that ours is a free faith that may be entered freely and left without rancor.

Welcoming is a many-layered practice, both physical and spiritual. It does go both ways. If we want to be ready to learn when our welcome might not work the way we want it to, then we must hope that everyone who comes into our spaces can give us - and one another - the grace to understand that part of our task is to learn and grow together. Welcoming needs to be agile and responsive - and those being welcomed need to understand that perfection is not possible and that psychic ability is unproven - we must commit to expressing our unmet needs in a generative way just as we must listen to the stories of unmet needs non defensively.

The fact of the matter is we won't be welcoming to everyone because there are people who need things different than what we have on offer. Some people need answers - we honor questions. Some people need unchanging tradition - ours is a living tradition, a living faith, that strives to learn and grow and respond to the times in which we live. Some people need more ritual, or a different kind of ritual, or less ritual. Some people need more God language, or no God language at all. And sometimes these needs aren't so much needs as they are comfort levels. Whenever you find yourself with an unmet need in a worship service - when you consider that 80% of it worked for you, perhaps, but 20% really didn't - remind yourself that the parts that didn't meet a need for you may have met a need for someone else.

Which brings us back to that uncertain feeling I thought of at the beginning, remembering being in a foreign country and getting a visceral sense of how very unimaginably large and varied human experience is - and also to coming around to learning from that experience.

How do we care for everybody who comes through our doors - or our shores! - and everybody who starts out here and then heads for other lands? We care for ourselves. We remind ourselves to be curious about all that we do not know. We tidy our guest house. We meet all at the door laughing, knowing some will stay and some will leave, and we consider how we can extend our

nourishing hospitality not only to newcomers but to our oldest and most beloved companions. This is a house we only build together.