

Come, Come, Whoever You Are
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The poet Robert Frost once said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." I disagree. For me, home is the place that, if I could go anywhere, I would go there.

It is so important to have a place where we feel at home, where we feel there is room for our spirit, where we have a sense of family! Last week, we collected some thoughts on what makes each of you feel at home here, and as I read them this week, I got tears in my eyes. I read things like, "It is a place where I feel safe, secure and valued - a place of belonging"

Those papers are on display in PH; I hope you will read some of them. Because you, each of you, is a part of why so many people feel so welcome and at home here. And I know that this congregation has worked on being hospitable, on paying attention to someone who is new, someone who has no one to talk to at social hour, someone who looks confused or sad or uncertain. That intentional work has helped to put hospitality into the culture of this congregation, and it is a beautiful thing.

One of the common themes I read in your messages is, "this is a comfortable place to be." We want and need to feel comfortable in the place we call home. I once had a therapist say to me, "If home isn't a place you want to be, what have you got?"

At the same time, comfort and familiarity aren't the only things we look for in a place where we feel at home. The freedom to change and grow, to challenge oneself and help others face challenges, is also part of feeling at home here. As one person wrote on their water drop, what makes this place feel like home is, "[I am] Always welcome to be myself; [and I feel the] freedom to change"

Another said, "I came here to receive light and inspiration to guide me through the darker places of life, and perhaps help others in their journeys."

That commitment, to walk together on our diverse journeys as we seek for truth and spiritual understanding, means that as Unitarian Universalists we are committed to holding our own truths just a bit gently, understanding that my truth isn't necessarily everyone else's truth. In

fact, my truth isn't necessarily what I will see as truth as I grow and experience more of life, and find more questions to ask.

So when we find people, in our congregation and beyond, who understand the world differently, it is our commitment to listen to them, to not dismiss them out of hand, to reserve judgment, to acknowledge the fact that they may have ideas and opinions different from our own that are worthy of respect. That's part of offering radical welcome.

But it's also true that being a welcoming people isn't always easy.

First of all, we are hampered by our biology. One of the most difficult challenges we face as a species is learning to overcome the tribalism that makes us tend to want to clump together with those we have most in common with, and to then create an in-group by excluding others who do not have as much in common with us. This tendency is part of our DNA.

Second, while sociologists have known for some time that exposure to people different from ourselves tends to make us more accepting of differences, new research indicates that it also can tend to make us more lonely.

In her sermon titled "Radical Hospitality," the Rev. *Marilyn J. Sewell* writes:

Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist best known for his book *Bowling Alone*, in which he writes of the growing isolation of Americans, Robert Putnam has done some new research—and his conclusions have been surprising [1]. He wanted to find out what happens when diverse groups of people live in the same area, as opposed to a homogeneous group of people living in an area. He found that when people are near people unlike themselves, they tend to "hunker down." Not only do they not interact as much with people who are different from themselves, but they don't interact with their own group as much: they watch more TV, they have fewer friends, they are less likely to work on community projects. The level of trust and interaction is greatest when people are with others who are most like themselves. When these results came back, Putnam distrusted what he saw, and so did his colleagues. So he spent years more checking out his data (30,000 people were interviewed)—and yes, he found he was right. Putnam, a dyed-in-the-wool progressive and very pro-diversity, nevertheless concludes, "In the face of diversity, most of us retreat."

Another study shows that churches that try to bridge social divisions have a tough job. Paul Lichterman, in his book *Elusive Togetherness*, says that churches that attempt to

bridge strong social differences mean well, but are most often not successful. He says when churches in his study tried to do outreach [2], differences in social customs and in styles of relating made it nearly impossible for faith-based efforts to close the gaps. He said that the single group in his study that did succeed constantly evaluated and reevaluated what they were doing and why they were doing it, in order to understand their own cultural underpinnings and those of others. In other words, they paid close attention to how they were talking, interacting, and engaging on a daily level. They learned to approach others as partners rather than as people they were helping. Success, in other words, lies not so much in ideology or in organizational structure, but *in the detailed content of our conversations* [3].

So what does this mean for us as a church? We are committed to being a welcoming community. We say we believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of all.” And yet we are human beings, and we have the same challenges that all human beings have. We feel more comfortable when we’re with people we know. We come to church, we gravitate to people we know. We feel less comfortable when we are with people who have different ideas and interests, different cultural assumptions. Tribalism is strong, and we need look no further than our church.

Let’s talk about some people who might actually visit our church, and imagine to what extent they might feel welcomed. (And the examples I’m giving are not unlike people who actually have visited our church.)

- a young woman, with an infant in her arms. When the baby starts to whimper during the service, she begins breastfeeding—
- a Native American with long dark hair comes in
- a man from a Pentacostal background waves his hands in the air during the singing of “Spirit of Life”
- a beautifully bedecked woman in a flowered print dress, with matching high heels and purse—she is 6’4” tall, and clearly transgender
- a person who speaks out of turn and can’t follow the hymns—he seems to be mentally ill
- a well-dressed couple—the man has an American flag in the lapel of his suit—and they have their Bibles with them

- a homeless man who hasn't bathed in a week
- a woman with a guide dog
- a service man back from Iraq, in uniform, visiting with his aunt and uncle
- a 21-year-old who just graduated from a college back East and moved here to find his first job—he knows no one in town—he is African American

I wonder...

I wonder - how would it feel to see one of these people come into our sanctuary?

I wonder how it would feel to have one of them sit beside me.

I wonder: what would help them feel more welcome here?

I wonder if I would even want to make them feel welcome.

I wonder.

Have any of you had the experience of moving to a really small town? I remember when I moved to Moroni, Utah with my young family. It was a town of about a thousand people. Most of the families had lived there for several generations. They were very social, had parades and truck mud stomps [or whatever they call them] and pancake breakfasts in the park and church picnics. They brought in food if someone was sick or had a new baby. There was a lot of community pride and spirit.

I found the people friendly enough, joined the church choir, was immediately asked to teach in the Sunday School; people told us about the town celebrations and school events and encouraged us to attend. People learned my name, my husband's and kids' names, and talked to us enough to learn where we were from, what my husband did for a living, etc.

But when we went to a church picnic, people sat with those they already knew well. Which is natural, but it left me and my family feeling like no one cared or noticed that we were there, no one really wanted to socialize with us and get to know us better. Has that ever happened to you? And that dynamic persisted for the fifteen years we lived in that town. It was a lonely feeling.

I have heard enough stories like this to know that this is not an unusual thing. In fact, it is a very natural thing. So if we want to be a really welcoming church, we have to recognize this tendency and be intentional about challenging it.

Again in the words of Marilyn Sewell:

I hope we would be called a friendly church, a hospitable church, and I think that we are. But do we practice radical hospitality—and if we did, what would that look like? Churches typically offer personal support to their members, but often stop there. A congregation committed to radical hospitality would go beyond seeking out others like themselves, for mutual support—such a congregation would recognize the humanity of anyone who walks into that church. And such a congregation would concern themselves with people who feel beyond the reach of organized religion. The public theology of such a church would not be limited to charity—which after all, puts the receiver one-down—but would also be committed to justice...

So “radical hospitality” is a term that rolls easily off the tongue—to actually carry it out is a demanding undertaking. But we are not a department store, not a government agency, not an HMO—in all these places, one would expect to be received politely, as it were—served, as is our due. No, we are a church, and it is appropriate that we ask ourselves, what is the moral dimension of our hospitality, the moral dimension of our reception of others, of our solidarity with others, who may not look like us or move from the same assumptions or values? I’m not talking about being politically correct, or legalistic—I’m talking about hospitality as spiritual practice. I’m not talking about just opening the doors—I’m talking about opening the heart.

Yes, bringing diverse people together is difficult—I think we have established that. This is not because people are bad, it’s because human beings have a built-in tribalism that needs to be challenged consciously, intentionally. What, then, opens the heart and brings people who are different, together? It is not ideology or theology, nor is it form that brings people together. It’s content and it’s conversation—it’s the universals that all people care about—their children, this good earth, an end to mindless violence, a yearning for peace.

I speak of radical hospitality today because there is a world out there that needs home, that needs community, and I want us to stretch spiritually, to stretch ourselves open. I know that when we take the risk—yes, of course, we’ll blunder, we’ll make mistakes—believe me, I have blundered more than once—but when we take the risk, our lives will grow so much richer and deeper because we have extended ourselves. Our creativity

will blossom, for we will not be stuck with our old assumptions, our narrow ways of perceiving reality. Our world will grow wider and softer and more trusting.

When I am a stranger in a strange land, will you harbor me? Will I harbor you? Let us keep living into the questions together. May it be so.

Footnotes

1. Robert Putnam, "E Pluribus unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Summer, 2007. In the summer and fall of 2000, Putnam and his team interviewed 30,000 individuals in very different communities, both large and small, all over the United States. He was surprised by his initial conclusions, and tried controlling the data for a host of other factors, but came to the same conclusions. Putnam is very much "pro-diversity" and does not see his work as a negative—he says, "The sooner we recognize it, the sooner we can deal with it."
2. *Outreach* in this context means volunteer work with disadvantaged groups.
3. Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Social Divisions*. Princeton University Press, 2005. Lichterman's study was done through fieldwork with eight volunteer groups or projects affiliated with a mainline Protestant church, one program affiliated with an evangelical Protestant church, and fieldwork with several related county organizations and groups. The single group that was successful took on projects that broke them out of several norms of "volunteering" or "helping" and put them in a position of partnership." Nonetheless, the relationships and ties that developed remained "fraught and tenuous." (p. 174) Lichterman concludes that it is very difficult to cultivate the kinds of social customs and setting which would be conducive for people to move beyond their limits without threatening the group's own togetherness. (p. 18)