

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

9.23.12 Sermon: “Crossing Borders”

Presenter: Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Borders make life possible. Without a membrane, a cell couldn't exist. The chemical reactions that are characteristic of living organisms need the right kind of semi-permeable container with an inside and an outside. With the right container with the right inner and outer conditions, those reactions are self-sustaining, they come alive!

Higher forms of life want borders too. Birds raucously defend the area around their nests. Ants attack other ants from foreign colonies. Chimpanzees fiercely patrol the borders of their troop's territory.

Borders serve essential purposes. The cell's membrane defends it from attack and chemical disruption. Skin keeps lethal germs outside and fluids inside. Fences keep predators away from sheep and goats. Walls and roofs protect us from the sun and rain, from the wind and snow.

Nature loves social semi-permeable borders too. When cultures meet each other, they borrow from each other. Just look at the number of words that migrate from one language to another. No technology stays put in one culture but quickly propagates. An isolated, primitive society within a generation of contact with the larger world will have flat screen TV's, satellite dishes and cell phones. Life thrives on novelty.

Borders becoming less permeable, however, can cause problems. The dropping of the iron curtain during the Cold War interfered with the communist social experiment. The United States' defensive response to the attacks on September 11th are generating harm by turning our borders into walls. Yes, there are real threats that must be blocked to protect us. And the harsh crackdown on immigration and customs enforcement is causing unnecessary suffering and disruption.

Unitarian Universalists were introduced to those harms by traveling to Arizona this summer. We had a chance to meet and hear first hand stories of the damage being done to people's lives. We also learned about the missed opportunities to bring or retain bright, ambitious students who could attend our universities and contribute to our growth and development as a nation.

Beyond national and geographic borders, one of the primary borders we create socially are religious borders. World religions, instead of being bound to a place or even a race, have other kinds of boundaries that define them. Unlike the ancient Druids that worshiped in sacred groves, or the Saxons who worshiped Yggdrasil, the sacred tree, the Hebrews had a movable Ark. For a time, the center of their religion became the Temple in Jerusalem. The

Jews were able to survive the destruction of the Temple at the beginning of the Common Era through their ancient foundation in a covenanted relationship with God and a guiding book.

That book, the Torah, contains the visible and invisible boundaries that define Judaism. It defines what observant, orthodox Jews can wear, what food they can eat, and when they will say their prayers. It establishes a long list of rules, some of which I read for you from Leviticus, also a source of the directive to love thy neighbor. Some of those rules are very costly which create strong religious cohesion. Men aren't about to cut off their foreskins on a whim. And once that act has been done, it cannot be undone. Their wisdom accumulated over many generations has been encoded in the Torah' rules, stories, poetry and songs.

Although we don't know much about the famous Jewish Nazarene, we can feel fairly confident Jesus was a border crosser. As you heard from the reading from Matthew, he had some edgy ideas about how to be faithful to the Jewish covenant to love God and to love neighbor. Jesus regularly reversed and challenged convention and expectation. He picked grain and healed on the Sabbath violating the Jewish law that prohibits work on the Sabbath. Jesus didn't always wash his hands at the proper time. He mixed with unclean people, with harlots and tax collectors, the outcasts and the despised. He disrupted religious practice in the Temple by overturning the money changer's tables. Jesus put the well being of individual people ahead of rule and tradition.

There is something paradoxical about founding a religion on the life and death of a border crosser. By the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic church had become rigid and doctrine bound like the ancient Judaism from which it sprang.

Our Unitarian and Universalist founders applied reason to the Bible and recovered a border crossing Jesus to follow rather than to worship as a God in the rigidly bound system of Trinitarian Christianity. They heard the call to create the Realm of God on earth rather than the command to get your ticket punched correctly for eternal life.

As Unitarianism and Universalism matured, they moved away from exclusive Christian belief toward commitment to human values being the center of our faith. And the core values they embraced at the center of both Christianity, Judaism and Islam were unconditional love and universal justice. Today's Unitarian Universalism is centered in a love that transcends belief and a commitment to just community that embraces all.

There are three ways most of us practice Unitarian Universalism. These are not right or wrong, better or worse ways but different ways, appropriate for individual temperaments and for where each person is on their journey through life. People come into our congregations with different needs that our individual approach to religious practice can serve effectively.

The first approach is the secular approach. These UU's aren't interested in exploring or

talking with others about their beliefs. They are looking for a community that will respect and embrace them without needing to know what they believe or don't believe. They embrace our values without wanting to connect them to religious ideas or practices. Belief in God or rejection of God are not central to their involvement in our community. These people are more interested in enacting our values in the world rather than contemplating their ultimate sources.

The second approach is the symbiotic approach. These people don't fit well into other religious traditions because they have non-conforming beliefs. We started out as an enclave for Unitarian and Universalist Christians who were rejected by Christian orthodoxy. As we shed our theological limits and discarded tests of belief for membership, we have become a refuge for people who have non-conforming beliefs of all sorts. We have UU Pagans, UU Jews, UU Buddhists, UU Humanists – lots of UU's with a hyphenated identity. I'm one of those people with a foot in the Buddhist world and a foot in the Humanist world, and a finger in Christianity and another one in Sufism. I don't feel like I fully belong in any religion except Unitarian Universalism that allows me to bring all of who I am and what I find meaningful to my religious life.

The third approach is the border crossing approach. This approach seeks to stretch one's current theological and philosophic framework. It challenges border crossers to get out of their comfort zone and encounter the other, the one who believes or practices their religion very differently. It challenges border crossers to question how others believe and practice while at the same time respecting the differences they encounter. Border crossers seek the discovery of insights and connections that may surprise them and change their own thinking. Border crossers ground their discoveries in shared values, mediated through shared experiences rather than shared beliefs.

What is gradually dawning on our Unitarian Universalist leaders, confirmed by our experience at this year's justice GA, is that the growth of our movement may happen best through the border crossing approach. Again, there is nothing wrong with the secular approach or the symbiotic approach. They work well for many people. What they don't do as well is provide an open door for wider diversity. The border crossing approach can create an affirming path for the inclusion of those who don't fit the historical, racial or cultural demographic that defines the spectrum of people who feel comfortable here.

Incidentally, the border crossing approach could also be a model for the development of world community that genuinely honors diversity and sees it as an asset for individual growth and development.

What do border crossers sound like? There was a workshop at GA this year about crossing faith borders that I think can give you the flavor of what I'm talking about. Participants were invited to write down their insights into crossing faith borders on cards and

pass them in. Some were read and all were published on the uua.org GA 2012 web site. Here are several of them that I found inspiring:

I've come to appreciate that even though the theology of another person may annoy me or leave me cold, their tradition and message can fire them up to impressive acts of mercy and social witness.

I read about a Baptist who started a cross racial supper program where families of different races in South Africa ate dinner at each other's home (illegally) and I swore I would never bad-mouth other Baptists again.

By learning to approach conversations with my Muslim brother-in-law with love, instead of fear and anger, I have become enlightened by him (the "other") instead of continuing the discord between us. It has brought peace to our family and allows me to teach peace to others.

I am a relatively new UU who has been thinking of UUs as a group apart (and maybe superior) from other religions, but now I understand the importance of working with others who believe in love, acceptance, and kindness.

We are so alike. I am learning so much about myself that I didn't know. I love our differences.

Crossing the faith border is something my faith calls me to do and something that we as UUs are uniquely positioned to do. Interfaith work should not be an afterthought for UUs. It's deeply embedded in our identities and history in addition to upholding the interdependent web that we hold dearly in our principles. Interfaith work helps us to form the beloved community with other faith groups but it has helped me to strengthen my beliefs through the process of religious coalition—being a beacon for Unitarian Universalism.

So if the secular or the symbiotic approaches work for you, that's great. Today I invite you to consider being a border crosser. Next week, I'll be discussing one way to be a border crosser through prophetic encounters.

I close with a beautiful poem titled Empathy by 16-year-old Amy Maddox of Bargersville, Indiana, that sums up emotionally what being a border crosser can do for our faith:

He prayed - it wasn't my religion.
 He ate - it wasn't what I ate.
 He spoke - it wasn't my language.
 He dressed - it wasn't what I wore.
 He took my hand - it wasn't the color of mine.
 But when he laughed - it was how I laughed,
 And when he cried - it was how I cried.

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