

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

9.15.13 Sermon: “Welcoming All Free Seekers”

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

We Americans today have a problem with hospitality.

“In Ireland,” C.E. Murphy writes, “you go to someone’s house, and she asks you if you want a cup of tea. You say no, thank you, you’re really just fine. She asks if you’re sure. You say of course you’re sure, really, you don’t need a thing. Except they pronounce it ting. You don’t need a ting.

Well, she says then, I was going to get myself some anyway, so it would be no trouble. Ah, you say, well, if you were going to get yourself some, I wouldn’t mind a spot of tea, at that, so long as it’s no trouble and I can give you a hand in the kitchen. Then you go through the whole thing all over again until you both end up in the kitchen drinking tea and chatting.

In America, someone asks you if you want a cup of tea, you say no, and then you don’t get any damned tea.

I liked the Irish way better.”

Not that we didn’t know any better back when Daisy Eyebright was writing her etiquette book over a hundred years ago. She writes this about welcoming guests:

You should try to make their visit as agreeable as possible, but without any apparent effort; so that they may not think that you are putting yourself out of the way to afford them pleasures in which you do not often indulge. It is your duty to endeavor to make the time pass pleasantly, but if your visitors perceive that you are altering the daily tenor of your life on their account, it will detract greatly from their happiness.

Now I know we have many fine hosts and hostesses in our congregation having visited many people’s houses, perhaps we are more exceptional, I don’t know. What I do know is we all have limits to that generous hospitable welcome. Who has passed someone on the street who is asking for a handout and not averted their eyes?

One of the challenges of urban living is not knowing the people who live around you. In a small town or village, from the beginning of time, where people were born, grew up and died on the same plot of land, no one was a stranger. Strangers in those settings are a novelty and a source of curiosity and interest. Not so in the urban setting where a stranger is perceived as a potential threat.

Mass media has stoked that fear with stories of strangers outside schools with candy luring trusting children into their cars with bad intentions. Advanced weapons technology has permitted one suicidal, crazed person to enter a school and do tremendous harm. My family never locked the doors to our house when I was growing up. That wouldn’t happen here – in fact we keep the

door to our congregation locked except on Sunday morning and pay a lot of attention to security issues. We are very aware that strangers can be very dangerous.

What we are less aware of is the low level of the risk of violence, at least right here and right now. Almost all of the strangers we meet are worthy of our hospitality.

Who would be intimidated, for example, if an elderly woman came to visit our congregation as happened in one church I heard about. The usher welcomed her and asked if he could help her find a seat. She said:

“Thank you young man. Please assist me to the front row.”

“The front row,” he gasped. “No one ever sits in the front row. Why would you want to sit there?”

“Well I’m a little hard of hearing and I so much want to hear every word the minister preaches.”

“Well, okay,” said the usher, “but I doubt you’ll want to hear him that much. His messages tend to be a little boring. You’ll not want him seeing you yawning in the first row. Won’t make a good impression.”

“Do you know who I am?” demanded the woman.

“No,” said the usher.

“I’m the minister’s mother.”

“Do you know who I am?” said the usher.

“No,” said the minister’s mother.

“Good, I’ll be happy to usher you to your front row seat now.”

I know a little about being a stranger. In the fall of 1977, at the tender age of twenty, I bought a rail-pass and set out for adventure from my hometown of Newark, Delaware. I visited friends in Athens, Ohio, Madison, Wisconsin, and Wenatchee, Washington, stopped in Corvallis, Oregon, and ended my journey in Palo Alto, California. I checked in to an inexpensive residential hotel, along with drug addicts and the mentally ill. (I didn’t know it at the time as I didn’t know anybody in the whole state). My first Sunday there, I visited the Palo Alto Unitarian Church. Having grown up a Unitarian Universalist in Newark, I felt this would be the place I would not be a stranger. And yes, a woman at the Membership Table, Peggy Polk George, welcomed me. I will never forget that welcome. I was no longer a stranger in a strange land, I had a home.

My experience of being a stranger in a new community is hardly unusual. It is more the norm today in our mobile society. People move all the time for educational purposes, for employment, to care for relatives, for retirement. Many immigrants today are forcibly uprooted from their

native land because of strife and conflict. Many of our neighbors right here are refugees. As part of our Board retreat last Saturday, we did a 15 minute walk around our neighborhood, dividing into groups of three and walking in four different directions. Our group said hello to a Hispanic woman living a couple of doors down on Washington Avenue, saw a woman in a burka, passed a large family of Burmese refugees outside the 7th Day Adventist church on the corner of Western and Lake and saw a great variety of people in Washington Park walking around the lake. Being a stranger is a very common American experience.

That stranger experience also carries over to our religious life. Unlike most of the world, Americans are much more willing to seek out a new religious faith that matches how they think and believe than many others around the world. I was speaking this past week to the Reverend Priscilla Richter, minister in our sister UU congregation in Schenectady. She has just returned from a visit to their partner Unitarian church in Romania. Part of our Unitarian heritage connects to the Transylvanian region there, where the first Unitarians separated from the Catholic Church during the Reformation in the 1500's. They have had a continuous presence there ever since.

Unitarians in this region have a strong sense of Hungarian national and cultural heritage. They don't often have visitors as people don't change churches much, as that would be a denial of one's ethnic identity. Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Reform Christians, and Lutherans (the predominant faiths) don't convert to or even visit each other's churches.

Unitarian Universalists in this country are at the other end of the spectrum. 90% of our members were not raised UU. People often come to us because they like a Protestant style of Sunday service. They leave their churches and congregations because they no longer believe the things they are expected to say and sing in their home church. Historically that difficulty centered on resisting the view of Jesus as co-equal with God, violating a basic principle of monotheism. Unitarians and Universalists have always focused on the humanity of Jesus, and the ethical and inspirational dimensions of his message. We don't focus on his miraculous powers (described in scripture) and his ability to get us into heaven. We are much more focused on a form of reality based religion. We care about how we should live in this world believing that striving to live a moral and ethical life will take care of what might happen in an afterlife if one should exist. And our Universalist forbears went even further saying that a loving God wouldn't punish us eternally anyway for our finite capacity for sin.

So, because our reasoned approach to religion, even after 200 years here in America, is still a very new idea to most people, we are a movement and a congregation deeply committed to offering a wide welcome to all free seekers of truth and meaning. Most of those words are in the first sentence of our current mission statement you'll find on the back of your program.

One source for our welcome can be found in sacred scriptures from around the world. From Genesis, the story of Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers is often cited as such an inspiration. In the Christian scriptures the story of separating the sheep from the goats is another inspiration. In both cases, hospitality offered without expectation of reward are handsomely rewarded. In the case of the Buddhist parable, the story is more a stimulant for self reflection. What is the quality of my own hospitality and generosity?

Another source are the ancient Greeks who celebrated hospitality through the word *xenia* which translates as guest-friendship. The Greek God Zeus was thought to be a protector of travelers, embodying the religious obligation to be hospitable. *Theoxeny* is a theme in Greek mythology in which humans demonstrate their virtue or piety by extending hospitality to the humble stranger. The Trojan war described in the *Iliad* of Homer actually resulted from a violation of hospitality. Paris transgressed the bounds of hospitality by abducting Menelaus's wife Helen. Talk about bad manners! These stories, like the Biblical ones, caution mortals that any guest should be treated as potentially a disguised divinity.

Within the Unitarian and Universalist traditions, the focus on hospitality has been there from the start. In the first copy of *The Universalist Leader*, a journal published in 1832, the editor writes:

Hospitality is the very spirit of the doctrine we profess. This doctrine, more than all others known among men, breathes good will to all mankind, and exerts all its means to benefit the-human race.

Interesting to see how that same concern is expressed differently from the Unitarian side from a story retold in a Unitarian journal in 1876:

Not long ago Mrs. B., while staying at the sea-shore, chanced to meet, at the same house, a charming couple, delightful people, genial, and cultivated. The more she saw of them, the more she liked them; and soon she asked the natural question, "where they lived?" "Why, they had been living in A.," mentioning Mrs. B.'s city, not far from Boston. It was strange, she thought, that she had never met them in society. "What church did they attend?" she asked, with a little diffidence. "Oh! The Unitarian Church," said the wife. "We took a pew and went quite regularly to church, but no one but the minister ever called on us. I don't remember any one in the society ever speaking to us, or calling on us. Except a few near neighbors, we made no acquaintance. We stood it two years, then my husband sold the house, and we moved this spring into the city." They were Marylanders, far from their own relatives or friends. Mrs. B. said afterwards, in telling the story, she felt ashamed to look those good, refined, pleasant people in the face, and tell them that was her own church, and she had gone Sunday after Sunday, and sat not far off. They had listened to the same prayers and sermons, joined in the same songs of praise, and yet remained all those years greater strangers than if a high wall of partition, not a pew-back, had shut them off from each other. She felt it had been a positive and irreparable loss to the church to have two such people among them, and yet exclude them from all real, vital fellowship with the society, by such entire lack of welcome and hospitality; such lamentable indifference and lukewarmness.

Now I know we are far more welcoming than Mrs. B.'s church. I share Mr's B's story because this remains a challenge for us today. This still happens without our meaning to do anything that excludes someone. It is in the absence of the offer of hospitality that the opportunity for relationship is lost.

The other side of this cautionary story is the exciting possibility that exists right now, today, in this room. There are many charming individuals and couples here today each of us has not yet met. As in the story, I know many of them because I have the privilege to meet with so many of

you personally and get a chance to experience the light you bring into our congregation. I do my best to connect people together, but I cannot do this alone. We have many programs like Circle Dinners, our monthly Potlucks and neighborhood gatherings, Small Group Ministry, our various interest groups and classes, all to assist in the welcoming process.

In Channing Hall, in Latin, we have words of welcome written in gold letters above those big beautiful bay windows. It translates: "I am human. May nothing human be alien to me." Another colloquial way to translate those words are, "May no one be a stranger here."

That is our welcome. That is our commitment. If you are a seeker after truth and meaning, you are welcome here.

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