

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

## “Intention Does Not Equal Impact”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 7, 2018

### Reading

I'm giving this sermon today because I was sitting in the audience listening when UU musician Jason Shelton said these words at UUA General Assembly in New Orleans, June 25 2017.

Sometimes we build a barrier to keep love tightly bound.

Sometimes our words themselves are the barriers.

The metaphors we use for the work of justice matter.

If we are called to be in this work together, then we have to understand when our words become barriers to full participation.

What does love call us to do? For some, it's standing on the side of love. For some, standing is not an option. And the continued use of that metaphor is a painful reminder of the barriers to full inclusion of people with disabilities in our congregations and at our General Assemblies.

What is my responsibility as an artist when awareness of this pain comes to my consciousness?

I am clear that the SSL metaphor - as I intended it - has nothing to do with the physical act of standing. It's about aligning ourselves with what love calls us to do. But I am also clear that intent is not the same thing as impact, and the impact of this metaphor has become a barrier for some among us.

Friends, when love calls, it sometimes asks us to let go of our attachments, and maybe even our t-shirts.

I'm not sure what to do about those t-shirts, but I do know that love is calling us to a new and deeper awareness, and I can do something about the song that I wrote.

So I ask you to rise not in body, but truly to rise in spirit - mindful of all that might mean for you - and join me in Answering the Call of Love.

### Sermon

Nothing aggravates people like being offended by someone else's words or actions and then hearing the defense, "I'm sorry you were offended - that wasn't my intention." If the person is lying to cover their veiled aggression, there isn't much for us to discuss here about such situations. **What is far more common** is people cause harm when their intention was **to do the opposite**. It is that mismatch of intentions and impacts that causes both sides a lot of distress. And it is quite common

for the person with the intention to reject the negative reactive response of the receiver of their intention, vindicating themselves because of their “good intentions.” I will argue that the impact matters **far more** than the intention, **especially** when there is **a differential of privilege and power**.

Dr. Derald Wing Sue has helped me understand how all this works. A professor of Psychology and Education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College and the School of Social Work at Columbia University, he has advocated for greater awareness of a pattern of behavior found in dominant white culture called “microaggression.”

[Dr. Sue defines microaggressions](#) as:

... the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by *well-intentioned* White people who are *unaware* of the hidden messages being communicated. These messages may be sent verbally ("You speak good English."), nonverbally (clutching one's purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots). Such communications are usually *outside* the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators.

The lack of conscious awareness of the hidden messages they are communicating is the bone of contention I commonly encounter with white folks when I bring up microaggressions. People ask how they can be held accountable for what wasn't their intention. The complicating factor is the intentions **on the surface** seem genuine. Yet, it is the broader repetition of the pattern that reveals its complicating factors.

This is very hard to discuss in the abstract. Let's examine some examples. Some may be obviously aggressive, others may not. [These come from a photographer](#) named Kiyun who asked her friends at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus to "write down an instance of a racial microaggression they have faced." Here are some of their responses from a photo of them holding a card with their statement:

- A woman of Asian descent holds: “No, where are you really from?”
- A man of African descent: “You don't act like a normal black person ya' know.”
- A woman of African descent: “Why do you sound white?”
- Another woman: “You are so articulate.”
- “Courtney, I never see you as a black girl.”
- “You're really pretty ... for a dark skin girl.”
- A man of African descent: “The limited representation of my race in your classroom does not make me the voice of all Black People.”

Each speaker presumes the pictured person is other, not “one of us,” not American as in the case of the Asian American woman. Some of the comments are complementing the person for “passing” as

someone who could fit into white majority culture. Yet the unpleasant surprise is the assumption of the speaker's otherness status of not belonging.

If this only happened once in a while, it wouldn't have the impact it does when it happens repeatedly. Complementing someone's intelligence by saying, "You are so articulate" ought to be a fine thing to say shouldn't it? That is a good intention. But if that complement arises from the assumption that people of your category, whatever it is, are not smart, that changes the impact. And if it happens 100's of times, it can create some ill will as impact rather than a pleasant feeling in the receiver of the statement.

I want to have the concept of microaggressions in our minds as we discuss the controversy around the song, "Standing on the Side of Love."

Back in 2004, you might recall, marriage equality was a big deal. Cambridge was the first city in Massachusetts to offer marriage licenses to same sex couples on May 17, 2004. On May 23, 2004, UUA President Bill Sinkford performed the marriage ceremony for Hillary Smith Goodridge and Julie Wendrich, plaintiffs in the case that won them the right to marry. UU musician Jason Shelton was sitting in Sinkford's office and heard him say, in response to a reporter's question, "We are standing on the side of love." Those words grabbed Shelton's imagination. He started scribbling notes and lyrics. The song seemed to jump out of the walls of 25 Beacon Street in "one of the most powerful, sacred, creative moments I've ever experienced," he said [to the UU World magazine](#).

It quickly became a theme song in state capitals across the country as we advocated for marriage equality. The Standing on the Side of Love campaign was born out of that moment too. It is an outstanding contemporary UU song of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that many of us enjoy hearing and singing.

But not everyone feels uplifted and included by this song. All along there has been discontent with the title and the lyric that refers to standing.

So, this is a good moment to remember another group often overlooked and one that experiences microaggressions, those who are not temporarily able bodied. The default assumption for people is that they have and are fully able to use their legs and arms, are sighted and hearing and verbal. That was not true for all of us when we were born and that is very likely not to be true for us as we age, especially if we live to a ripe old age. We assume a default level of cognitive ability and comprehension of English. When I put a sermon together, I make the assumption of a high school education and often include references that would be familiar to someone who has attended college or at least regularly reads the newspaper.

Early on, those who could only sit on the side of love let Shelton know about their displeasure with his song, that they didn't feel included in the song. He responded as I expect many here this morning would respond, "it is a metaphor." You can't physically stand on the side of love since love too is a metaphor not a concrete object.

Not that Shelton isn't sensitive to ableism. As a music director, he changed the words used before singing a hymn, from "please stand as you are willing and able" to "please rise in body or spirit." Notice the subtle difference that has a big impact. Notice how those who can't stand for any of a selection of reasons are reminded that they are not able to stand by the first statement and in doing so are pointed out as non-normative. Standing is what we should be doing unless you are an "other." "Rise in body and spirit" is much more inclusive as anyone can remain seated yet rise in spirit.

So ... what changed that moved Shelton to change the words and the name of his song? The witness of the Reverend Theresa Ines Soto. From the UU World article:

At General Assembly 2016 the Rev. Theresa Soto spelled out for the denomination how "ableist" language *makes her feel*. Soto, now interim minister of the UU Congregation of Flint, Michigan, has cerebral palsy. The theme for ministers that week had been walking, as a spiritual practice and a metaphor—woven through homilies, readings, and hymns. At the Sunday service Soto, who was being recognized as a newly fellowshiped minister, sat at the front of the stage in her scooter. She held up an "Ouch" sign at every "standing" or "walking" metaphor.

It was her "Ouch" sign that touched Shelton's heart. The UU World article continues with his response:

When someone in your community says they're feeling pain or rejected, you can't just ignore that, Shelton explains. What's the work we need to do together to navigate that pain so we become a spiritually mature community? Sometimes we may need to make big changes ourselves. Sometimes we may need to develop coping skills together. We need to keep asking, "How can we learn from the hurt?"

"There's a larger conversation around liturgical language as metaphor that we need to have," he says. "But we're not going to have it if the people who hold power treat language as sacred, unchangeable text. How do you move toward equalizing power? I decided I could sacrifice one of my darlings."

Now we have plenty of ableist hymns in our hymnbooks. What are we going to do with "Guide My Feet" and "One More Step" and "Do You Hear?" There is a much larger conversation to have that has started with Shelton's song. Maybe this wouldn't be an issue if our hymnbooks also had songs that honored those without feet and hearing and sight.

What was the response at General Assembly and online to this desire for greater inclusion? Both appreciation and resistance. The resistance fretted about political correctness and looking silly to the rest of the world. Here is an example:

When I first came across this [UU World] article, I thought I had stumbled into The Onion by mistake. According to Merriam-Webster, "stand" can also mean "to take up or maintain a

specified position or posture," or "to be in a particular state or situation." It doesn't necessarily mean physically standing upright. But there will always be those who interpret innocuous things as personal attacks.

The "innocuous things as personal attacks" is a common response that will be familiar to people of color who suffer microaggressions. Since it isn't a big deal to me (innocuous thing) why should it be to someone else? The rejection (personal attack) must be a sign of a problem with the person offended rather than a call for deeper consideration, listening and empathy.

I know this attitude personally from a similar controversy that (I hope) would seem like a no-brainer today. The 1960's blue hymnal had many references to God that used the pronouns "him" "he" and "his." As feminism swept through our congregations in the 1970's, identifying God as male became a publically expressed problem that now had everyone's attention. Those of us of a certain age will remember the assumption that the male pronoun was a universal reference for all people. The Green hymnal supplement with new words to those offending hymns that degenderized them was part of the response to the 1977 General Assembly Resolution on Women and Religion. I remember my unhappiness with having to sing the "neutered" hymns on Sunday. I was attached to singing the old words I knew by heart having sung them all my life. Why mess up these perfectly fine hymns! Why were these feminists being so sensitive? What's the big deal?

Eventually, with the prodding of my mother and my girlfriend at the time, I came around. This issue got resolved with the new gray hymnal released in 1992 that solved many of the problems with better words that scanned much better.

And now we are on to the next problems.

The central issues here are not rational but emotionally driven. Yes, you can quote the dictionary about what standing means. That doesn't resolve people's feelings of inclusion and exclusion. And who is in and who is out is always a struggle in any community. When we say, as we do in our mission statement that we welcome everyone, it commits us to have to struggle with these questions.

Shelton wasn't persuaded to make the change because of a rational argument. He was persuaded through the experience of empathy for Rev. Soto's experience, dramatically expressed, of not being included. And that is what moved me as well.

There are many, many different ways to say to each other you are worthy, you matter, I care about you and want to include you in our religious community. There are also thoughtless ways to send the message of exclusion and diminish the humanity of another unintentionally. If our goal is to send a welcoming message, it is not a big deal to find other words that more effectively do that work.

And if we are sending the opposite message unconsciously, let us be grateful for an opportunity to look inward and examine what layers of defensiveness may be inhibiting our expression of genuine and authentic care and love.

This is the hard work of facing the ways we have been infected by the dominant racist, sexist, homo and transphobic and ablest culture that is operating hidden in our unconscious. Exposing those social toxins and repudiating them is deep Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice. And it hurts. And it is very unpleasant. But if the result is our ability to love each other better, it is worth doing. That has been my experience and I hope that has been the case for others here today.

Changing the words of a song is a small thing but the message it sends is very big to those who don't feel included. Following Shelton's example, may we be willing to sacrifice our verbal darlings too, for the greater good of inclusion in our community.

## **Benediction**

**Waiting** by the [Rev. Marta Valentin](#) (from the book [Voices from the Margins](#))

Step into the center / come in from the margins  
I will hold you here.

Don't look back / or around  
feel my arms / the water is rising.

I will hold you / as you tremble.  
I will warm you

Don't look out / or away  
life is in here / between you and me.

In this tiny space,  
where I end and you begin  
Hope lives.

In this precious tiny space  
no words need be whispered / to tell us we are one.

You and I / we make the circle  
if we choose to.

Come / step in  
I am waiting for you.