

RADICAL HOSPITALITY-WELCOMING THE VISITOR!

Our first Principle is to affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Hospitality grows out of respect for our common humanity. To be welcoming is to practice our faith in a way that lives out our first principle.

We Unitarian Universalists are generally a friendly bunch. We enjoy talking with others and we like getting acquainted with new people, but many of us are also introverts who are reticent to reach out to people we don't know. I certainly don't want to suggest that we go outside of our comfort zones, but it really may be ok to say hello to someone who is new and to try to get acquainted with them!

In a pamphlet entitled, “Religious Hospitality, A Spiritual Practice for Congregations,” Peter Morales, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association invites us to:

Think of a time when you have felt truly welcomed. Maybe it was coming home after a long time away. Maybe someone took you in when you were far from home. Relive those feelings for a moment. Feel that warmth again; see those smiles and feel those arms embracing you. What a gift it is to be welcomed.

Rev. Morales comments:

Hospitality, true hospitality, is emotionally powerful. It touches something very deep in us—our profound human longing to feel accepted, to belong, to be loved, to feel safe, to be valued and respected.

Hospitality is not something to be proclaimed; it must be lived. Hospitality is both a spiritual discipline and an expression of spiritual health. If I feel angry, hurt, unloved, or alienated I cannot offer a warm welcome. Conversely, if I am at peace, filled with joy at being alive, aware of those around me with compassion in my heart, then hospitality flows naturally and inevitably from the depths of my being.

What is true of an individual is also true of a community. A congregation in which people do not genuinely love each other is not likely to exude warmth. A congregation that is self-absorbed and disconnected from its community cannot offer religious hospitality. Hospitality is love in action.

Rev. Morales goes on to describe the many religious sources from whence we come to understand and practice hospitality:

The world's great religious traditions have long affirmed the link between religion and hospitality. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures admonish us to welcome the stranger as a guest. Hebrew scriptures, recalling the oppression the children of Israel suffered as foreigners, teach us to love the stranger, the outsider. The Book of Leviticus instructs the people, "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

The teachings of Jesus extend this tradition. Jesus and his followers went beyond welcoming the foreigner to the more radical practice of welcoming the marginalized: children, women, tax collectors, the poor, lepers, prostitutes, even enemies. In Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, there are no foreigners. We are all God's children and we are all loved.

The Buddhist tradition arrives at a similar place by a different road. In some ways the Buddhist perspective is the most radical. Buddhism teaches that the very distinction between one group and another, between insider and outsider, between citizen and alien is a dangerous illusion.

I think we will have to get some copies of Rev. Morales' pamphlet and hand them out to all of our greeters, ushers, and other welcomers! The rest of the pamphlet is also well worth reading.

I have often been the recipient of the generous heart gift of hospitality, which has been given in the form of a kind word, a meal, and a place to stay for a while. These are gifts freely given by people with an open heart. I have tried to pass those gifts forward when I could do so, and have found that acts of kindness, generosity, and welcoming also return their own gifts to me in the warmth that I feel from giving.

We are truly blessed in this community to have so many people with kind and generous hearts, who not only support this congregation financially and in service, but are always there to provide a word of welcome to both long-time members and newcomers! Sometimes, though, we depend too much on the “official” greeters, and don’t step forward to welcome others, especially newcomers. It may be because so many of us are introverts, or because we don’t want to overwhelm someone visiting for the first time, but sometimes we aren’t welcoming enough.

Most of our visitors have already checked out our website or the UUA website, or they have been to a UU Church before. There are a few people who just come to check us out or because they have a class that requires visiting different religious groups, and some are already UUs just passing through, but the vast majority of visitors today are potential members who want to see if this church will be a good fit with their beliefs and practices.

We aren’t as hard to find as many Unitarian Universalist congregations. Our location and street visibility is better than average among UU congregations. The church Jane and I served in Rancho Palos Verdes, Pacific Unitarian, was definitely further off the beaten track, not on a main road, in a residential neighborhood, and it looked much less like a church than this building.

Rarely do people show up at Unitarian Universalist churches by accident. A few come with an agenda and will not likely return, some are passing through, but most people who visit are potential members, interested in who we are and what we are about. They come even without marketing campaigns, mostly by word of mouth from someone who told them they sounded like a UU, some just because they found a description of a community and beliefs that made sense on our website.

We ought to welcome home anyone who succeeds in finding us, for we have things to offer anyone who comes in our doors. Not all will stay, some will come for a while and then disappear. Others will quickly become part of our congregational family and as quickly become leaders. We have something to offer to almost everyone who finds us, but not everyone will stay forever.

Some will move and attend other UU congregations. Some will return again after moving around the country or after some life event.

What do we have to offer? We have a principled foundation which calls us to respect individuals and to encourage individual journeys of life and faith. We have a commitment to acting with compassion and seeking justice. We seek to practice democracy and respect freedom and diversity, with the limits that persons not be harmed by others. We seek to build a friendly supportive community in which persons can find meaning in their lives and we hope to extend that community around the world. We offer a deep respect for the universe, that interdependent and interconnected web of all life of which we are a part. What we have to offer is what everyone in the world needs, a place to explore life's meaning in a company of caring fellow sojourners.

If everyone in the world had a community like ours, in which persons are both respected and called to accountability for their actions, there would be far fewer problems in the world. If everyone had the opportunity to be accepted even if their beliefs and lifestyles do not match the dominant view, there would be far fewer wars. If everyone was respectfully called to accountability for their actions in the world, there would be less injustice, less pollution, more windmills, and a greater effort to conserve, reuse, and recycle. If everyone had the encouragement to be as intentional about life priorities as most UUs are, there would be fewer meat-eaters, more tree-huggers, and far more people driving hybrids and electric cars!

There are all kinds of reasons to welcome more people into our community, but one of the most important is that there are so many people who could benefit from what we have to offer. There are so many people looking for what we have. There are so many people who have become discouraged and stopped looking for what we have. There are so many people who are unhappy because they do not have the freedom to seek religious and philosophical meaning beyond the narrow confines of their current religious home.

Not that we are perfect by any means. There are other communities where people can find encouragement for their religious journeys, but the mix we offer is the best that I have yet discovered. We could learn about being welcoming from some other groups, though. The Turkish Muslims of the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue and Rainbow groups in Little Rock are among the most welcoming and hospitable hosts I have experienced. That group sent Jane and me to Turkey in 2007, and our DRE the year before. Their generosity of spirit is almost without bounds. There are also many Christian groups that practice radical hospitality better than we often do.

To be truly welcoming is a spiritual practice, a discipline, a gift freely given to another. How can we be more welcoming, even radically hospitable to those who come through our doors? The first thing we can do is to invite people to join us, especially friends, neighbors, family members, but even acquaintances. Perhaps we should have some bring-a-friend Sundays. We can all commit to watch for newcomers and help them to be comfortable in our gatherings. I don't mean mob them when you see them coming, but take time to introduce yourself and try to get to know new people. Sit with someone new, help them to understand the service, offer to answer questions about the church or about yourself. Be respectful even if new people seem to have different ideas from you.

One group UUs too often tend to respond less positively to are people who strongly identify as Christian. Yet our roots are in Christianity, most of us value the teachings of Jesus, and we regularly honor our Judeo-Christian roots. Most of us have come from Christian backgrounds, and some of us have had negative experiences in specific Christian groups, but please respect others, including Christians. We do not all think alike, believe alike, or practice alike, but we can all learn from each other and we can respect each other's beliefs so long as no sentient creatures are harmed along the way! We ought to welcome Christians as easily as we welcome Buddhists, Jews, Pagans, humanists, atheists or agnostics. We need to go beyond tolerance to acceptance.

As Peter Morales suggested, think about a time when you felt truly welcomed. Remember that feeling when you see someone new walking uncertainly towards the door. Even if you aren't an official greeter, take time to say hello, to help a new person find his or her way into the sanctuary or to a greeter or the information table. Sit down next to a new person, talk to the new people during coffee hour, share the kind of welcome that you would like to experience if you were a newcomer or visitor.

Reaching out to welcome the stranger is a spiritual practice. It will help to bring new people into our church and into this movement, and it will help to make the world a friendlier healthier place, one contact at a time. Please take the time to make a difference. Invite your friends, invite anyone who sounds like a UU, but especially greet those who come to our doorstep, for each one has made a sacred journey to be with us, and we ought not discourage any who could help strengthen our congregation or shape a better world!

So may it be! Amen!