

Absolutely, Maybe, Definitely Not

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As a minister I've become used to the reality that when some people talk with me they will withhold more than they might when speaking with someone who is not a minister or, conversely, they let it all out and say things, sometimes with alarming bluntness, they would never say to another person. A while back I found myself in a conversation with someone who fits the latter description, a one time Unitarian Universalist with whom I have had various interactions and conversations over the years.

This most recent encounter was spurred by the death of a mutual acquaintance. After briefly sharing our fondness for the deceased, she asked me how things were going in my ministry. And after I shared some highlights and the usual struggles, she abruptly volunteered, "I always liked how open and welcoming the UU's are. But I couldn't get on board with their embrace of homosexuality." A comment which was then quickly followed by, "And how is your uh...friend?"

"My husband is fine, thank you for asking", I replied, and then added, "I'm glad you've found a community where you feel more at home."

According to an old saying of uncertain origin, "Everyone brings happiness. Some by coming. Some by leaving." A truth I experienced first hand as my conversation with this woman ended and we parted ways.

Now, there's an obvious humorous vibe to that saying, of course, but it got me thinking about more than just this one woman. Indeed, I have to admit there are people I'm always glad to see or ready to welcome and then there are people I can't wait to get away from or who I'd prefer to avoid altogether. And by people I mean specific individuals as well as certain personality types in general. I am, after all human. I don't like everyone I meet or encounter, nor am I universally liked by everyone who meets or encounters me. That's just reality and not something I lose sleep over.

But then I got to thinking about church and I'm forced to admit, there's a disconnect between what churches say about themselves and the reality of their practice when it comes to people. Almost every church, regardless of denomination or theology, proclaims to the world on their buildings, banners, lawn signs, websites, orders of service, and on social media, that all are welcome. And indeed if you were to ask clergy, members or attendees of various churches if all are indeed welcome at their church, many, if not most would say, "Absolutely!"

Hmm.

Don't get me wrong, I know saying, "All are welcome" sounds nice and makes people inside and outside the church feel good. The problem is, it's not true. Indeed, the assertion is absurd. As the author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor states in her book, "When God is Silent", "No church I know is open to everyone. Whom do we think we are fooling?" She adds, "I would so much rather see a sign that says, "We do the best we can," or better yet, "Christians meet here. Enter at your own risk."

And, let's face it, across our association, that sign could read "Unitarian Universalists meet here. Enter at your own risk."

Okay, let's take a breath for a moment. I know this can seem, at first, like something of a gut punch and send our minds reeling and wondering, "What are we doing wrong?"

Well, let's think about that for a moment.

Churches of all stripes are face challenges in attracting and retaining new members, particularly the much coveted young family with children.

For some time now the strategy of many churches has been to mirror secular consumer culture by trying to figure out and offer "cool" programming while asking less of potential new people. And yet these are not what studies suggest people, particularly young people, want from a church. Indeed, an article in the Washington Post a few years back noted, "authenticity" is one of the two of the most important qualities people 15-29 look for from faith communities. (The other is connection.)

Another way to look at this is that young people, like all of us, are increasingly treated as consumers first and people second, if at all. Someone is always trying to sell us something and will say whatever they feel they have to make the sale. In other words we are routinely bombarded by companies, advertisers, politicians, pundits, celebrities, influencers, making claims we know are opportunistic. Church can and ought to be different. And we can be by being authentic.

The trouble is when it comes to authenticity, "All Are Welcome", doesn't pass the sniff test.

Here's the thing, as Unitarian Universalists, we cherish freedom of belief. It is often one of the things that initially attracts people from creedal or more dogmatic traditions to our congregations.

And it appeals to people who have no prior experience with religion as a faith where they and their children can develop and refine a theology within a much broader framework than many of the churches around us. What we sometimes forget however, is that there is a framework. Indeed, freedom of belief does not mean, as is sometimes assumed among and about Unitarian Universalists, freedom to believe anything. If that were the case, it

wouldn't matter what we believe. But as Sophia Lyon Fahs reminds us in our first reading, it does in fact matter what we believe.

A similar point is made by my colleague, the Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen who posits the criterion for belonging in Unitarian Universalism is a commitment to and practice of "humane living." For Larsen that means no Neo-Nazis, KKK members or sympathizers, no anyone who believes as a matter of course in oppressing others. That is, people whose beliefs, in Fah's words, "encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged."

But far from limiting membership to dull goodie goodies, Larsen contends, "You've got to know how to sin" to be welcomed into this faith. We're not interested, he notes, in people "who are holier than thee or thou". You know, those people who hold beliefs that are, "divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.", to use Fah's words.

No, we want people who are aware their own capacity to stray and to do wrong and thus have more sympathy for the human condition. Such people tend to respond with compassion rather than react with self-righteousness or searing judgement when others fall short.

Larsen further notes that those who believe the minister should have the exact same views they do probably won't feel particularly welcome in Unitarian Universalism either. For as Fah's warns, "Some beliefs are rigid, like the body at death, impotent in a changing world." Indeed, I often caution those considering joining a congregation that if I haven't yet disappointed you or otherwise rubbed you the wrong way, the day will come when I will. Trust me on that. It may be something I say or don't say, do or don't do or as was the case in one congregation, that I wore beige pants with a black robe. You just never know. You and I, we're human, so make sure you're ready for that before you join.

Returning to the question of welcome,
Are all welcome here?
Definitely not.

And it's not because we're doing something wrong.

It's precisely because we hold that it matters what we believe and that certain beliefs, particularly those that denigrate, deny, or diminish the humanity of others and ourselves are incompatible with the values, principles, and purposes of Unitarian Universalism.

That being said, rarely is someone told directly, "You're not welcome." Indeed, we don't presume to know when someone crosses the threshold that their beliefs may put them at odds with this faith. Instead, it is often the individual who comes to realize that their beliefs are incompatible and intuitively or decides they are unwelcome. That realization may

emerge quickly, motivating a first time visitor to leave before the service is over...I've witnessed it myself from the pulpit... or it may take some time, perhaps even years.

Now, somewhere in between the fallacy of all are absolutely welcome and the reality that some are definitely not there lies a vast stretch of maybe. And it is people who are maybe welcome who have the potential to make or break a church and reveals whether we're committed to building beloved community or maintaining a private club.

So who are the maybe welcome?

It's not that easy a question to answer. It will vary to some degree depending on where a church is located, the style of worship, and its history, for example. But a good place to start in identifying the maybe welcome is to notice who's not here.

For example, in a church filled with able bodied white straight married couples with children we could say maybe people of color, single, childless, differently abled or LGBTQ people and families are welcome, but maybe they're not. If a church says they are welcoming to all and still no one other than able bodied, white, straight, married couples with children ever comes and stays then chances are the church is unwelcoming in ways they either don't realize or care about. Perhaps its that the sermons, programming, and budget only illustrate or address issues familiar to or of concern to a single or very narrow demographic. Or that music composed and hymns written after 1850 are rarely played or sung, and always in English. All of which communicate unwelcome by omission, intentional or not.

Another way to identify the maybe welcome is to ask yourself how you know people, what's going on, and how things work at the church? Do you know what you know because they're clearly communicated to everyone or do you know because you're an insider? Good and clear communication is a form of accessibility and an indication of genuine welcome. Limiting information to those already in "the know" or making it hard to find or figure out stuff, intentionally or not, communicates we're not that interested in you or that you can join us... if you can find your way in.

It's also worth remembering that the maybe welcome aren't just those yet to arrive. Some are already here and may have been here longer than you.

Consider our second reading, "Letters After My Name" by Kari Kopnick. In the reading Kari is in, there's no question that her church is glad to have her. She even has a paid position at the church working with children and teens. Now, maybe its because they like her so much that they assume she's "just like them", that her life experience is more or less the same as theirs, you know, "normal", which in UU churches often means the experience of being white, educated, and middle to upper middle class. So the question, "What's your undergrad in?", which makes Kari so uncomfortable, seems perfectly

natural because of course Kari went to college. But actually, she didn't. And in the face of that assumption and the question about where she went to school, which seems so harmless, Kari feels unwelcome. Indeed, in her closing paragraph, which I withheld during the reading, Kari writes, "My faith says all are welcome. My faith says we are all whole and holy and good. I myself have said this to dozens of children and teens. And yet, we have miles to go to make this so."

There are so many ways, overt and subtle, that a church communicates to the maybe welcome where they stand, whether they are welcome or unwelcome. Over the years many denominations and associations, including our own UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) have and continue to produce or recommend literature, materials, and programming to address and help congregations identify and work on how they welcome and/or exclude people. An indication this has been an ongoing issue of concern for churches of all kinds for a long time.

And these are important resources, but we don't need to consult these or be fully up to speed on the latest thinking about how to address the age old religious concern and spiritual practice of welcome before we commit and take action here and now. We can begin today by returning to where we started this morning, affirming that it matters what we believe and then take up the spiritual task of examining our beliefs and practice as individuals and a community.

For as we learn to distinguish beliefs that are "like walled gardens, rooted in fear, divisive, like blinders, that weaken selfhood, are rigid, impotent in a changing world" from those that are "expansive, bless one another, promote community, invite exploration, nurture self-confidence, and are pliable enough to adapt to new life," we will be better equipped to measure our aspiration to welcome against our practice.

And as we work to bring our beliefs and practice into closer alignment with one another, we can admit without shame not "All Are Welcome", but with authenticity proclaim, "We Do The Best We Can."

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed