

Living Among Strangers

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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It used to happen every few months or so. That is, back when I used to have a landline telephone. The phone would ring, I'd make the mistake of answering it, and a telemarketer, in what was usually a cheerful voice, would ask, "Is Mr. McNamara there?" That's my husband. And if he were home I'd usually ask who's calling or just give him the phone. When he wasn't home I'd say he's not home or not available. Nine times out of ten the caller would then ask, "Is Mrs. McNamara there?" To which I would respond, "This is he." Following the inevitable awkward pause, the caller usually thanked me and either hung up or said they'd call back at another time.

Although people usually laugh when I share with them this response to a telemarketers assumptions, my response to those assumptions is not necessarily meant to be funny. Rather, it is an act of self-empowerment; self empowerment in the face of an injustice I, and millions of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ), experience in one way or another regularly. I'm not talking about homophobia here, but a more subtle yet no less alienating oppression...heterosexism.

Heterosexism is defined as, "a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. It is frequently marked by the presumption that other people are heterosexual or that opposite-sex attractions and relationships are the only norm and therefore superior." (wikipedia). Because it is a systematic form of oppression, that is, deeply embedded in our social, political, economic and legal structure, we are all raised to some degree or another to be heterosexual.

The more overt forms of heterosexism make headlines...legal challenges to conversion therapy bans, state legislative shenanigans intended to challenge and overturn marriage equality, bakers and other business owners who claim providing certain services for LGBTQ people, particularly couples, infringes upon their religious liberty. Then there's the somewhat quieter forms like advertising in which portrayals of couples, families and displays of affection are almost exclusively heterosexual. The more savvy marketers have taken steps to change this where risk to the bottom line from consumer backlash is believed to be minimal. And then there's a largely silent form of heterosexism, the experience of living among strangers. An experience that in truth affects not only people who identify as LGBTQ but everyone.

A number of years ago I found an envelope in a dresser in my old room at my parent's house. Inside were two letters written when I was in my late teens, one from my mother to me and one I wrote to myself. My mother's letter expressed concern that something was troubling me. She said she worried I was lonely; wondered about my self-esteem. She knew I had dated but never had a steady girlfriend. She wrote about all the ways in which- in her eyes- I was special, talented, and loved. She closed the letter expressing hope that I would work through whatever this unnamed issue was and assured me everything would be alright.

It was a sweet if not cautious letter.

The letter I wrote to myself, was written about the same time as the letter my mother wrote to me. In it I pined after a male friend to whom I was attracted while also writing desperate pleas for help, for answers...and wondering what's wrong with me. My letter was something of a prayer echoing sentiments of Psalm 31 which reads in part, "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes from grief, my soul and body also." I felt terribly alone. I didn't know anyone personally who felt as I did and of those in the wider world who shared my "affliction" nothing good was ever said or happened to them.

Now, some might wonder why I didn't just go talk to my mother, after all she did seem to notice that something was bothering me. That would have been a logical response if this type of experience were simply an issue of communication, but it is not.

It is an issue of how we love.

Heterosexism and any form of oppression for that matter, teaches us to hold love tightly and express it narrowly. It does this by assuming that everyone's basic life script, that is the overall trajectory of everyone's life, is and ought to be the same. In a heterosexist society the basic life script everyone is given can be summarized as: There are boys and there are girls - no parts for non-binary folks in this script- eventually boy meets girl, they marry and then have children. Anything that impedes, counters or challenges that basic script is met with reactions ranging from mild suspicion, to moral condemnation, and, as we're seeing with transgender people today, vicious demonization and legalized discrimination.

In retrospect, my mother's cautious approach in her letter to me suggests she suspected the unnamed issue troubling me might be a deviation from the life script we both assumed I would follow. My own letter to myself wrestles with it more openly but we both nonetheless concluded it was a problem to be figured

out and solved, that is, eradicated. Like the crow in our story for all ages this morning, I wanted more than anything to just learn to walk like a partridge. That is, to fit the script and fit in. Never was the script society had handed us questioned in either my mother's or my own letter.

Without realizing it, we had perpetuated an oppressive assumption which unchallenged creates a gap between who we're assumed to be and who we really are. The price we pay for this is a life living among strangers, hearts hidden from one another, love constrained, and human potential unrealized.

It doesn't have to be this way.

While oppressive systems cannot be willed away, they can be brought into the light of day, challenged, and resisted. To do this we need to be empowered and to empower others...something I know SUUS (Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society), as an official Welcoming Congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, is capable of.

For those of you here today unfamiliar with what the official welcoming congregation designation means, it is a designation congregations receive following an intentional process of education, reflection, and congregational vote in churches seeking to actively promote and affirm the inclusion of people whose identity as LGBTQ in all aspects of congregational life and leadership.

Becoming an official Welcoming Congregation is an act of empowerment. Being an official Welcoming Congregation is the practice of empowerment. A practice we are all charged to take up as people of a faith whose center is love.

How do we practice empowerment?

We practice empowerment by learning to love differently. Something the poet Marge Piercy astutely describes as hard even painful at times. It is hard because our instinct is to hoard love by grasping for and holding tightly to expectations, unexamined norms, and life scripts intended give us a sense of solidity and purpose in an often chaotic, uncertain world. Life's challenges are easier to bear, we reason, when we have something or someone else to blame or point to for screwing things up in the world.

Learning to love differently is painful because it forces us to experience loss, an experience our society spends a lot of time, energy and money trying to avoid. Indeed, to love with hands wide open as Piercy suggests, means letting go, releasing what was in order to embrace what is and that includes letting go of or rewriting those life scripts handed to us or that we buy into. Sadly, those unable

or unwilling to do so...unable to love with hands wide open are those who often disown or lose their LGBTQ loved one or friend. Which still happens a lot.

And this serves to remind us that just as oppressive systems can't be willed away, loving differently can't simply be willed into existence...it is something we cultivate...not by acquiring information, but by living into it by faith,...

Here I have to confess, Piercy's poem made my job a lot easier because in her poem she names four ways to love, differently:

consciously
conscientiously
concretely
constructively

To love consciously we first look inward. Many spiritual traditions emphasize the need to love oneself before we can truly love others. This does not refer to indulging in self-centeredness but self awareness and acceptance. To love consciously then, it is to get to know ourselves, not necessarily to understand, but to listen to the life within you.

This awareness helps us embrace or let go of the thoughts, feelings, assumptions, beliefs, values and motivations we need to in order to be more accepting of ourselves and others. It helps us connect to and embrace our uniqueness in this world of other unique beings. Being able to love consciously enabled me to come out as a gay man and my family to not only accept but affirm me.

To love conscientiously concerns commitment and vigilance. When I marry couples, I remind them that marriage is a most solemn commitment and not to be entered into lightly. To love conscientiously means we're in it for the long haul, aware that there will be ups and downs, and that we're willing to endure those ups and downs in service to a greater good. Being able to love conscientiously allows people here and beyond these walls who love consciously to get up and keep up the fight in the face of cynicism and setbacks. It's one of the reasons marriage equality became a reality.

To love concretely is as we might imagine, to do something. It is demonstrative, an outward manifestation of the love we have cultivated inwardly.

One of the most powerful aspects of the life of Jesus as it is presented to us in the Christian scriptures is that he not only spoke about love, he demonstrated it and often in the process wound up violating some long established religious or social norm....in other words he questioned the script of his society, hanging out, as the

Bible tells us with all manner of people his society considered undesirables: tax collectors and sinners, the sick and poor. To love concretely is to transform our highest values into actions that become a lived experience of love.

Gandhi is often credited with saying, “Be the change that you want to see in the world.” Whether he said those exact words or not, they nonetheless describe what loving concretely is all about. It’s what SUUS does when we engage in the various ministries and meetings within and beyond these walls.

To love constructively concerns intent and purpose. It’s love guided by mission. When we love constructively we may be engaged in acts of affirmation for ourselves and others or we may be engaged in the work of transcending obstacles in pursuit of our personal wellbeing or a broader justice. When we love constructively, we reach beyond the known horizon towards possibilities we can’t fully imagine including changes to family, social, political and economic systems. To love constructively is live by faith, a faith not unlike that expressed in words famously paraphrased by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but originating with our Unitarian forbear The Rev. Theodore Parker, who said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

By loving constructively we and now many other faiths have become a viable spiritual home and community for LGBTQ people of all ages and their families. Houses of hope pulling together in faith to keep bending that arc.

Learning to love differently we move closer to experiencing the meaning of Rumi’s words offered in our call to worship, “Don’t hide your heart but reveal it, so that mine might be revealed, and I might accept what I am capable of.”

To love differently, to have and not to hold...love offered with hands wide open, is a powerful, empowering force; a love whose practice encourages reflection and acceptance of self and others, and inspires commitment and determined action. It is a force wrought by faith that chips away at oppressive systems by dismantling barriers within the heart, barriers we learn and can unlearn.

The practice of empowerment, of loving differently is essential to being a Welcoming Congregation and something that is as important as ever today. I invite you in the days and weeks ahead to reflect on ways we might strengthen our practice. To ponder how we, as a gathered body, might continue to love differently to help ensure no one, including ourselves, is living among strangers.

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be