

OUR HOUSE IS SO BIG!
OUT FOR GOOD: PRIDE SUNDAY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
September 17, 2017

OPENING WORDS *Come One, Come All ~ Ian W. Riddell*

Come one, come all! (Come Out for Good!)
Come with your missing pieces and your extra screws
Come with your hard edges and your soft spots
Come with your bowed heads and upright spines
Come all you flamboyant and drab
verbose and quiet fidgeting and lethargic
All you with large vision and tender hearts
All you with small courage and tender fears
Bring your lisp and your stutter and your song
Bring your gravel and your drawl and your lilt
Bring your anger and your joy and your righteous indignation
Misfits and conformists and everyone in between
Come into this space and be welcome
Bring who you are
Bring where you've traveled
Bring what you long for
and let us worship together

Come, let us enter this time of worship and celebration of PRIDE...with our whole selves, just as we are, Out for Good.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Mullah Nasruddin Feeds His Coat ~ Islamic folk tale*
(Mullah Nasruddin is invited to a feast, but doesn't have time to change from his work clothes before attending. The reception he receives is less than welcoming! Full story [here](#).)

READING *Choice* ~ Alex Kapitan
(We didn't have time to read this in Sunday's service. You can read it [here](#).)

MESSAGE

Have you ever had one of those dreams where you discover some unknown doorway or passageway in your house leading to a room you've never been in before? I have. For me, the room is most often some version of a rough-hewn attic, with wallpaper hung by somebody's ancestors, and ratty lacy curtains billowing in the breeze coming through open windows. For me, the feeling is most often, but not always, one of adventure and excitement and wonder. How could I not have known about this incredible space? What stories are hidden here? What shall I do with this new-found room?

Most interpreters of dreams say that a house is an analogy for one's psyche, and that newly discovered rooms are an indication of some unknown or subconscious part of oneself, and of the potential for opening oneself to new possibilities.

We're not going to analyze MY dreams today, thank god, but I was reminded of this dream experience as I delved into the theme of 'welcome'. In order to truly 'welcome' something or someone into our lives, we need to have the space... literally, figuratively, or emotionally.

So, if we as a congregation, a gathered community, had a collective consciousness capable of dreaming, might we ever, collectively, have a dream of discovering an hidden and completely new space? Could we stumble upon rooms that would indicate our readiness for something new and heretofore unknown? What would the discovery of those rooms suggest?

I'm moving on, but let those questions simmer; we'll come back to them.

The theme that the Peterborough PRIDE committee chose for this year's celebration is "Out for Good." On their website, it says:

"Out for Good" speaks to the need to ensure that we are free to live as our whole selves our entire lives and not face discrimination at any time...

The need to ensure that we, all of us, everyone of you, is free to live as our whole selves our entire lives. Our whole selves, our entire lives. Regardless of our doubts and our convictions...whatever our hopes and our fears...whatever our faith or lack thereof...whatever our heritage or the body we occupy...whomever we love. Our whole selves, our entire lives.

Now, I don't know where they got that theme, but google led me to a blogpost of the same name by an ABC journalist...Dan Kloeffler.¹ Kloeffler 'came out' in 2016 when he made an on-air offhand remark that he would consider dating "Star Trek" hunk Zachary Quinto. Reactions to his 'admission' exploded everywhere. His blogpost, Out for Good, was in response to those reactions.

So here's a guy with a good job, probably pretty well-paid, at a time when 'coming out' might not seem like such a big deal. But it was. Still. Just the phrase 'coming out' implies an inside and an outside...or in the language of our theme, those who welcome and those who are welcomed. Or not.

Kloeffler said in his blog:

As I was growing up, I swore that if I ever enjoyed any kind of visibility or success, I was going to somehow help break down the walls of hate that hold others captive...Some might say I'm a little late to the party, so I've got to make up for lost time. Unfortunately, there's plenty of work to be done to show [others that] it's what inside their hearts that really counts.

Out for good. But as yet, not always, and not for everyone, good to be out.

For all of us, wherever we reside on the queer scale, what is it that makes being our whole selves so difficult? While there are endless theories and countless tomes on the subjects of welcome, inclusion, and diversity, I suspect that, at its most basic level, our inability to be our whole selves in every situation throughout our whole lives is as simple; it's because we don't feel accepted or seen or welcome as who we are.

And I daresay that when we don't feel welcome, it's because, in fact, we are being, or have been, judged for our differences.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kloeffler/out-for-good_b_1062703.html

Now, I would contend that we judge or making comparisons because we have not experienced total acceptance and have learned to judge ourselves harshly. And so the cycle spins...we've heard, "judge not, lest you be judged" and yet we know that we practice judgement because we have been judged.

Why? Why do we continue to draw boundaries of inside and outside?

Many spiritual teachers talk about diversity by using analogies to nature. They speak of the beautiful complexity and complicity within eco-systems...where it is the diversity that makes the system strong and healthy...where each part of the system has learned to help protect, and be protected by, some other part. This is especially true of flora and fauna, forests and waterways, rivers and trees.

And while competition exists even in that part of our natural world (consider our pre-occupation with managing invasive species,) it seems to me that as things evolve into higher 'orders' of beings, competition increases. Protection of one's own interest. Family first. Survival of the fittest.

My theology is one of process, and I believe that we are still and forever evolving; what seems an innate need to sort ourselves into like groups, is simply a learned response that we can unlearn and evolve beyond. I believe that we are in a phase in human development, and that our ongoing evolution calls us toward becoming more and more cooperative, less and less interested in enclaves of homogeneity, more and more comfortable with, and even desirous of, existing in diversity. One day, I hope, humans will think it very strange to be in a group of like-minded, similarly educated, equally socially mobile, racially undistinguishable people. Imagine that day. "This is so odd," we'll say. "How boring. How uncomfortable," we'll think. It's another way to think of the beloved community...where a non-homogenous group is the usual...when existing in diversity is what we know best. (Of course, let's not forget that being 'different' is the daily experience of many people...but being accepted is not.) Assuming the prospect of glorious human diversity in coexistence is appealing to you, how might we get there? How can we evolve beyond our penchant for a comfort based in sameness and familiarity?

Last June, I was privileged to attend the Ware Lecture at the UUA General Assembly, where I heard Brian Stevenson speak about justice.² He is a brilliantly well-spoken attorney working on behalf of people on death row. I hope you won't think it too much of a leap for me to conflate justice with welcome...or justice with the ability to be one's whole self...? After all, most injustice occurs when and where people are NOT allowed to be their whole selves, with equal access to privilege and resources.

At any rate, I am reminded something he said, which is that the first thing we need to do to create justice is to 'get proximate.' In other words, we need to get up close and personal with those who we might perceive as different. Solutions, Stevenson said, come inside of that proximity, not before you get there. We can't create welcome, or encourage diversity, from outside of the experience of it.

We must create our comfort with diversity, our ability to welcome it, out of the experience of being within it, which means that we have to be willing to go through some initial discomfort.

² <http://www.uua.org/liberty/criminaljustice/ware-stevenson>

We have to be willing to enter those places and interactions and experiences that are unusual for us...that aren't our 'usual' places...in order to let go of the fear that keeps us away from those experiences.

In an essay entitled "The Power of Welcome in an Age of Loneliness," Jennifer Bailey talks about the painful truth that many do not know people whose life experience is different than their own.³ She wrote:

"In the absence of proximity, our instinct is to turn to who and what we know. In our echo chambers, we find shelter and reinforcement for both our core values and our worst prejudices."

And Parker Palmer has written that:

"People who wall themselves off from diversity in gated communities and 'lifestyle enclaves' become increasingly paranoid that encountering the other will put them in harm's way. But the folks who have daily experience 'in the company of strangers' learn that it just isn't so."⁴

Bailey suggests that we need to have experiences and conversations that allow us to create new narratives...new stories that say that "unity does not mean sameness, and that it is indeed possible to bridge differences without compromising [who you are.]"

Stevenson said something very similar in his lecture...that we have to change the narratives that sustain inequality and injustice. To do that, he said, fear and anger must be dismantled, or at the very least, put aside. (And I would contend that fear and anger are born within the place where we think we need to keep things, and people, 'alike'!)

And, of course, another key to being truly welcoming is to find and practice compassion...for self and for others. To seek to know and to understand. To welcome the stranger, in others, but also in ourselves. To allow another to be their whole self, without our judgment or criticism. To allow the same for ourselves.

Remember the reading Marion offered? About choice? It ended with a suggestion to respond to anyone who tries to tell you that who you are is 'just a choice' with these words:

"Tell them choice is sacred. Tell them that in your faith tradition we don't love people despite their differences or because they can't help being different, we love people because of their differences and because diversity enriches our world and our communities."

Beautiful, eh? I wanted to know more about this person...Alex Kapitan...so I googled them, and I found a really amazing sermon they'd given titled "Welcome as a Spiritual Practice."⁵ In it, Alex said that they are in the business of Welcome. They said that the kind of welcome that changes lives is one that makes each person feel intense belonging. That being a "Welcoming Congregation" isn't about 'those people'...it's about 'us' and about what we're willing to do to expand our definition, and practice, of welcome. They said this:

"One story I hear over and over again is ... that as UUs we are really good at welcoming people if there's only one thing that's 'different' about them. They'll say, it's okay if I'm

³ <https://onbeing.org/blog/jennifer-bailey-the-power-of-welcome-in-an-age-of-loneliness/>

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-the-vitality-of-diversity/>

⁵ <https://rootsgrowthtree.com/2017/05/25/welcome-as-a-spiritual-practice/>

gay, as long as I'm also white, and college-educated, and able-bodied, and monogamous, and middle or upper class. It's okay if I'm a person of colour, as long as everything else about me matches up with the norms and expectations of who 'we' are as UUs.

But the more things about me that fall outside the boundary of how we define 'us', the harder it becomes to experience welcome and belonging."

Whew. That's hard. And I'm afraid it's real.

Real welcome, incarnational belonging, happens when we are willing to be changed by our interactions with others. And to be changed, we must get proximate to, and comfortable with, difference. All the difference. The whole of who each one of us is. The whole of each person who walks through our doors. The whole, embodied, living/breathing, hurting/healing beautifully unique self of each person we encounter. And with the whole, sometimes suppressed and hidden, of who we are, ourselves.

Kapitan says that for them, the purpose of spiritual community is not to be comfortable, but rather to build relationships that are strong enough to hold us when things are hard. How about for you? What's the purpose of spiritual community, THIS spiritual community? Does it involve some discomfort? Are you willing to be discomforted? (BTW, our purpose statement says both that we strive to be a welcoming community, and that we foster personal transformation...two things that call us into discomfort!)

Sometimes, our discomfort is the hopeful sign that something is about to change, that we are about to move one more tick along the journey of evolving compassion and openness. Sometimes, like the dream of finding an unknown room, it can be an indication that there is transformation on the near horizon.

In this community of open minds and hearts, I believe we have unlimited rooms yet to be discovered...that we have an unlimited capacity to forever draw the circle wider. I believe that our house will always be big enough to be a house of welcome even though it will take practice to open up the new spaces. I know that there are going to be many ways and times in which we experience discomfort (like when getting up close and proximate with using they/them pronouns and having gender-neutral washrooms.) I know that there are unlimited ways that our boundaries can, and hopefully will, be broken open...and that just when we think we've opened ourselves as far as possible, we will become aware of another way in which we are not so open and welcoming. And I know, I trust, that we will keep trying.

To welcome is a practice. Ongoingly. But to be welcomed, to belong, is everyone's right and desire. Every person in this room deserves to be seen for the whole multi-layered beautiful being that they are. Every being in our world deserves the same.

May we dream big and often. And may our dreams carry us into worlds and relationships as yet unknown.

READING *Proud* ~ Amanda Udis-Kessler

One: Today, we affirm with joy that we are proud.

Many: We are proud to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and questioning.

One: We are proud to have survived and thrived despite challenges to our dignity, well-being, and sometimes even our lives.

Many: We are proud to be heterosexual and cisgender allies.

One: We are proud to live and work in solidarity with our LGBTQ friends and family.

Many: Together, we build the Beloved Community.

One: We and those we love have been judged, mistreated, assaulted

Many: But we are here and we are proud.

One: We and those we love have been stereotyped and have faced discrimination

Many: But we are here and we are proud.

One: We are together, and we are proud.

All: And together, we build the Beloved Community. It grows among us even now.

CLOSING WORDS

~ *Victoria Safford (adapted)*⁶

Ours is absolutely, gladly, hopefully and humbly, gaily, a gay Fellowship, a gay tradition, where everyone, including heterosexual members and friends, is welcome, where everyone is needed, where everyone's experience is cherished as a sacred text, because no one's experience of living or loving can be comprehensive, because each of us holds clues the others need about how to live with dignity and joy as a human person, and none of us knows enough about that yet to be considered whole.

I know that on some sad and disappointing days these words describe the community that yet shall be and not the congregation that is.

But I know too that to build the community of which we dream is an act of co-creation.

To live into its creation, is a privilege, a prophetic imperative, a joy, a duty, and a holy sacrament.

Come in, we say. Come out, come in. Be out for good. We're all in this together.

Amen. Blessed Be.

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/any-other-questions>