

**20 December 2009 \* Would You Harbor Me?**  
© **Rev. Erika Hewitt \* Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

Five days; Christmas is just five days away. Whether you feel excited or Scrooge-like about its coming, millions of the world's people are preparing to re-tell one of humankind's most famous myths: that of a young, expectant couple seeking shelter; finding hospitality in a stable when the inn at Bethlehem was full; the birth of their child among the sheep and cows.

If I wanted to present you with a simple message, I would do nothing more than remind you that we UU's are a welcoming faith – not just of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people. For us, being welcoming and inclusive means that we offer shelter to those who are spiritually adrift, and that we push the boundaries of *tolerance* towards *acceptance* and *appreciation*. It's what we do; it's who we are. Many of us found Unitarian Universalism as exiles from more stringent faiths. Some of you are still literally weeping with joy for the haven that our chosen faith offers.

But you deserve more than a simple message; you appreciate, and so often rise to the task of chewing on complex questions. And I grow bored with resting, smugly and satisfied, on our inclusive laurels. So I'm pushing the envelope this morning by wondering out loud whether there are limits to our UU inclusivity – and if so, where they lie.

Here are a few stories of unexpected visitors.

The first set of tales is like a set of Russian nesting dolls (*matryoshka*): a story within a story within a story (if you had your coffee already, you'll be able to follow along just fine). I'll start with a story courtesy of my soul-sister Beth – also a UU minister.<sup>1</sup>

Beth was working at home this summer when her doorbell rang. She opened the door and encountered two earnest Mormon missionaries: young men wishing to chat with her about their religion.

Beth being Beth (would you or I have done this?), she invited her visitors in, listened to what they had to say, and in response passionately shared *her* “good news” of Unitarian Universalism. The point wasn't to change their mind, and they probably knew that they weren't going to change hers. The point was to create a moment of connection beyond – or in spite of – ideology.

At the end of their visit, one of the Mormons asked, “Shall we pray together before we leave?”

“Yes,” said Beth, “I'll go first.” And so she said a prayer, and then the missionaries said a

prayer, and they went on their way.

Before I finish *that* story, we're pausing to descend to the next layer of the story. I spent a weekend at Beth's house in March, and found myself in a similar situation: on Saturday morning, that same doorbell rang. Beth was on the phone, so I answered the door to find a group of women from a nearby Baptist church. I didn't invite them in, but I did chat with them as they handed me a brochure (expressing a very conservative theology). The women invited me to church the next day, but I explained that my friend and I wouldn't be able to attend, as we ourselves were ministers.

As they turned to leave, they said, "Have a good day," and I replied "You too. I hope people are nice to you today."

Come with me, one more layer down, to your layer of this story. In April, from this pulpit, I told you about meeting these Baptist evangelists – but I inadvertently went off-script. Now, sometimes I go off-script because the Spirit is channeling lovely ad-libs through me... but sometimes she sends error messages. Instead of accurately reporting that I said, "I hope people are nice to you," I accidentally told you that "I wished the women luck."

At coffee hour that day, I heard from one of you (who shall remain anonymous but who agreed that I might tell this story today): a Live Oak member was upset with me for wishing luck to Baptists. Does that mean that I was wishing them visitors, and also converts? Didn't it mean that I wanted their conservative theology to succeed?

Maybe so; maybe so. In that moment on Beth's doorstep, however, I wasn't a Unitarian Universalist tallying my religion's points against the Baptists. We were on neutral ground. I was one human being determined not to shut the door abruptly on another human being's face. The spirituality I aspire to is one in which I see people's labels or identity only after honoring their humanness.

"Preach the gospel at all times," counseled St. Francis of Assisi, "Use words if necessary."

That is the first rule of welcoming, and these come next:  
Hospitality and kindness don't operate on a point system. Compassion shouldn't always come easily. What if compassion counts more when we choose it amid internal struggle?

Let's go back to Beth's doorstep. After welcoming in, and praying with, her Mormon visitors, several weeks went by. The summer weather grew oppressively hot. Again, one afternoon, there was a familiar ring of Beth's doorbell. Again, she opened it to find that same pair of Mormon missionaries, wilting on her doorstep.

“Excuse us, ma’am,” said one. “We’re sorry to bother you, but it’s very hot out here.”

“We remembered you,” said the other, “because you were so kind to us when we visited you. Would you please give us a glass of water?”

“Hello?,” replied Beth, “I was thirsty and you gave me to drink!” Of course: come in.”

The young men drank their water, thanked her, and left her house. But since Beth told me this story, those missionaries have never left my mind. Of all the homes, in all the neighborhoods in her town, a pair of earnest Mormon boys found harbor in a Unitarian Universalist’s home because she had embodied the religion of kindness. She treated them first as human beings, not white-shirt-and-tie-and-Elder-So-and-So-nametag-wearing evangelists.

These are the words of Rumi:<sup>2</sup>

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other  
doesn't make any sense.*

Would you or I open our door to Mormons?

Would you give a glass of water to a door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness?

Would you hold the door open for someone wearing a “Yes on Prop 8” T-shirt? To someone carrying a book by Glen Beck?

Would you give comfort or a smile – or for heaven’s sake, send a Christmas card – to someone in a military uniform? Would I?

Probably so. As I’ve said, being on neutral ground helps open the tap of kindness. Finding the humanness beneath the labels helps. But what if the strangers at our door have no interest in the common ground of our humanness? What if unexpected visitors came here, to our Sanctuary (not neutral ground, but holy ground), to condemn what they view as our UU “wrongdoings”? Would we welcome them? Should we?

This is my last, true story of unexpected visitors:

It was the mid-1990s, on a Sunday morning at my Unitarian Universalist church in New

Orleans. We all knew the men were strangers not because they were unfamiliar, but because they were wearing suits and ties – *not* your typical UU outfit, even in the deep South.

The men scattered themselves in our pews, one of them near me, and I saw they each wore something on their lapel. Craning my neck, I took in their buttons – those large photo buttons – and the words, “It’s a baby, not a choice” printed around a shocking photograph of an aborted fetus.

My memories of that morning have blurred, but a few details stand out with clarity. One is that when the offering baskets were passed, the men dropped in large, even more grisly photographs and anti-choice propaganda. I also remember the tension at coffee hour, and watching a few people trying to argue with the men, who grew vocal in their righteousness.

\* Are we called to be welcoming and inclusive “no matter what”?

\* Does being an inclusive religious community mean that anyone gets to be here, or does their belonging hinge on a combination of intention, purpose, and behavior?

I didn’t know the answers to those questions; I was a new UU, and my church didn’t speak of – let alone have – a Covenant of Good Relations.

There were other things I didn’t know, as a 23 year old. I didn’t know, then, how many women guard the secret of their abortions; how many women are haunted by the pain of making that decision. I didn’t realize that some of the women in my church – women I cared about very much – felt assaulted and diminished by our visitors, and by the violent images they brought into our holy space; didn’t realize they felt betrayed by the congregation’s – and our minister’s – passive welcoming of these men who had come *neither* to build bridges of understanding nor to find the common ground of our humanness, but rather to bully and judge us.

These are also the words of Rumi,<sup>3</sup>

*If you are here unfaithfully with us,  
you’re causing terrible damage.  
If you’ve opened your loving to God’s love,  
you’re helping people you don’t know  
and have never seen.*

This is not to suggest that all UU’s should be pro-choice; this sermon isn’t about the terrible dilemma of unwanted pregnancy.

I'm not suggesting that we pay lip service to, but not practice, "the free and undivided conflict of opinion."

I do wonder how we discern, as individuals and as a congregation, behavior (...not people: *behavior*) that diminishes and assaults the personhood of those who belong to us.

I ask myself whether congregation should try to protect the invisible wounds on the souls of its people; whether our sacred caretaking might be more important than flying our "inclusivity" flag.

Here's why these questions live in me: how and when we welcome others is the singular area where Unitarian Universalists grow uncomfortable with "shades of grey." We all know that Unitarian Universalism is not a black-and-white faith. We don't dole out simple answers in the face of mystery. We don't expect cut-and-dry theology, so we tell ourselves that we're comfortable with ambiguity. We're not: when it comes to welcoming others, many UU congregations welcome reflexively, with a fundamentalist streak.

How do we welcome radically – because if you're new to us, we welcome you, warmly and openly – and still discern the limits of our welcome?

In this season of making room for those in need, and in the spirit of welcoming those who hunger for the gifts of our community, may we be wise keepers of community; and generous bestowers of love.

### Endnotes

1. The Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson is the minister of Palomar UU Fellowship in Vista (San Diego county) CA.
2. From *Essential Rumi* by Coleman Barks
3. In "Say Yes Quickly," also translated by Coleman Barks