

Radical Hospitality

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This past summer, tragedy came to the Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville Tennessee. A gunman entered the building and began shooting during a performance by the youth. Two people died and many were injured. One of the men who died jumped in front of the gunman to take the brunt of fire, saving many more lives. This was a congregation that had received some local publicity for being a welcoming congregation for gay, lesbian and transgendered people. The shooter had wanted to take his revenge against liberals whom he blamed in a note for preventing him from getting a job.

This is a nightmare for anyone who has ever come to church. That the sanctuary of a congregation would be so terribly violated with violence and hate. That people would die and others witness their deaths in the very place where we celebrate life, is truly unthinkable. Fear would of course be a natural response for the people in Knoxville, and for other Unitarian Universalists throughout the country. Who would blame the members of this church if they barred the doors of their building never to let another stranger in? And yet that is not what they

have chosen to do. They have responded to this tragedy by telling their community that they are still there. The church and the sanctuary have been rededicated, and worship services continue. In fact our own Suzie Cornell, whose son is a member of the Tennessee Valley UU Church, is there this morning presenting that congregation with our card and the money we raised to support them. These events touch us all, but instead of closing off from the world, Unitarian Universalism teaches us to reach out. The folks in Tennessee are not just reaching out amongst other UUs but to all the people in their area.

I am sure there is still healing to do. Fear is a powerful thing. Rationally we know that the likelihood of a crazed gunman entering our church is not very high. It isn't zero, but it's pretty slight. However, anyone who has been nervous or had second thoughts about getting on an airplane can tell you, statistics do not always calm our fears. Fear of the stranger can be particularly powerful following an event such as what happened over the summer. Any congregation could become leery of outsiders. But this is not who we are. We are, as Rev. Barbara said in our words of welcome: an intentionally inclusive congregation no matter what your creed, your race, your economic situation or whom you love. You are welcome here. These may be hard words to live by, but that is what religion is all about. Spirituality is when you live by your deepest held convictions despite your own fears.

Welcoming the stranger to be among us, to be a part of us, despite the risks is called Radical Hospitality. Radical hospitality is the intentional effort to make room for someone who is not a member, who does not pledge, who has not heard of William Ellery Channing or Olympia Brown, and making a space for that person here. They may be unfamiliar to us, look different from us, perhaps they have more or less money than we do, or maybe English is not their first language. Regardless, radical hospitality is about making them feel welcome and at home.

This notion of radical hospitality comes from a very interesting source. It finds its origins in the Catholic Church, and not only the Catholic Church, but the Order of St. Benedict! The Benedictines were the ones who began practicing radical hospitality in the first millennium. These are the cloistered monks with robes and hoods! It was a bit surprising to me to discover this. I had to read the Rule of St. Benedict for a Christianity course in college, and it didn't exactly read like a manual for welcoming people. The Benedictines closed themselves off away from the world, building monasteries on the tops of mountains in Italy. But we cannot just read the Rule by itself. History must be taken into account.

Benedict lived at the time that the Roman Empire was collapsing. The Barbarians were at the gates. The dominant force in European civilization for over a thousand years was coming to an abrupt and

disconcerting end. A lot of apocalyptic literature was written around this time. With the Roman Empire crashing down around their ears, it felt like the end of the world. Everything was about to change. So Benedict created these little enclaves, little sanctuaries that would preserve a piece of that Roman culture. That which was familiar to him and to many others would be preserved at least in a small way, by removing themselves from the chaos of the world. This was the context within which Benedict wrote the Rule of the order that bears his name. It was the context in which the early monasteries were established.

Now this all may make sense from an armchair sociologist's point of view. But to a reader of the New Testament, creating monasteries shut off from the world is not a very Jesus-y thing to do. Even a cursory reading of the life of Jesus in the Bible reveals that he didn't start monasteries full of believers. He went out into the world and hung out with people who were on the margins of Jewish society: lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors who represented Roman authority and humiliation. Benedict saw this, and so when he wrote the Rule, he built in a number of things that would be specifically for welcoming people from the outside. And it is from this that the tradition of radical hospitality entered into the Christian tradition.

Essentially Benedict was welcoming in the stranger, even when the stranger came from that hostile world that he and his fellow monks had purposefully abandoned. He was saying, "Take that risk. Welcome

people among you.” In many ways it is a very Universalist message, ironically. We welcome all people no matter their potential differences with us. We greet each other following the worship service. Astute readers of the order of service last Sunday, and this one, would notice the exhortation in the last item of the worship service. “Greet one another with radical hospitality.” The early Universalists taught that no one was outside the love of God. All of us are the children of God no matter who we are or what we have done. You may or may not agree with their theology of course, but the spirit of inclusiveness that it invokes is still with us. We know this not only by the words of welcome that are spoken here every week. We also know that that spirit of inclusiveness is still a part of our UU tradition thanks to the response by the Knoxville Tennessee Church. Universalism may have changed its theology, but radical hospitality, overcoming fear with welcome, is a part of modern Unitarian Universalism.

Believe it or not there is something like this in Buddhism too. If you are to go to a Zendo, a meditation hall, you will see a series of mats lined up around the perimeter of the room. On each square mat is a round cushion about six inches thick. As the service is about to begin, people stand behind their mat, bow, and then sit on the cushion to begin meditation. When I was on retreat during my sabbatical a couple of years ago, one of the teachers talked about setting up this arrangement every week. She said that you always put out more cushions than you

think you will need. “Someone put a cushion out for you the first time you came. Therefore you put a cushion out for someone else.”

Someone, probably unknown, set up a cushion for a new person—they literally made room for them in what was probably going to be an unfamiliar and foreign worship experience. For this act of generosity and compassion, you can never thank that person for allowing you to begin your practice. All you can do is to set up a cushion of someone else. All you can do is reflect that same generous spirit of compassion for the next person. Make room for them even when you don’t know who it will be for, and they will probably never be able to thank you for it. That too is radical hospitality.

Lonni Collins Pratt, in today’s reading, takes this even a step further. Her friend cannot imagine that taking care of a grandchild full time could be a rewarding experience. Lonni, who is a Catholic and a lay Benedictine, believes that it is a gift from God. Pratt tells us that making physical room for the stranger is just the beginning. We really need to make room for the person who is unfamiliar to us in our heart and in our mind. Radical hospitality is just that: the attempt to see and understand the world from another person’s perspective. It is the attempt to leap beyond our own conventions and assumption about how the world is or how it should be and take the radical step to try and see outside the eyes of the stranger. This is very hard to try much less to accomplish. But the spiritual exercise is really in the trying. Radical

hospitality is about seeing another person's point of view, yes, but it is more than that. It is reexamining the way we look at life as a whole. It is a fantastic way to open yourself up to the possibility of being transformed by another person's experience.

Actually, something like what Lonni Collins Pratt described with her friend, happened to me once. It was New Year's Eve ten years ago between 1998 and 1999. I was a ministerial intern at the time in Chapel Hill North Carolina. One reason I remember this is because the girl I was seeing at the time broke up with me about a week later. My hosts were a young couple that I had befriended in the congregation. You have to remember I was young and hip then, not as old and crotchety as I am now. There were only about half a dozen people at this party, just enough to whittle away the hours playing Trivial Pursuit. At some point in the evening, the topic of conversation turned to politics in a general sort of way. I only really knew the hosts at this party but everyone seemed kind of liberal middle class sorts of folks. Of course by that I mean culturally, as a ministerial intern I barely had two nickels to rub together.

One fellow at this party had long hair and was a bit of a hippie. He and his wife were a little older than the others in the room. I remember that he got a little confrontational during the discussion about politics and what to do about welfare reform. He chided us for our narrow, rather comfortable views on the subject. We were talking about things

only at a distance. As it turned out, this fellow had lived on the streets from some time. He had been homeless in the Pacific Northwest. He remembered not having any food. He remembered being vulnerable to the elements. He remembered having to look out for other people who, like him, were desperate to survive and might try to hurt him. I can still recall the tension in that room; particularly because it was such a small party. Eventually his wife calmed him down a bit and we all rather awkwardly apologized and then changed the subject. Just like the woman in Pratt's story, someone else may look similar to you but really see the world very differently.

I think some of the tension that emerged during that conversation was because we had failed to practice radical hospitality of the heart. Certainly this man had been a part of our group, we had made space for him, but we were inadvertently neglecting his point of view. You see one of the key components of radical hospitality is recognition. Christians might say that they recognize the stranger as Christ among them or as a child of God. Buddhists might tell you that they recognize the stranger as a Buddha in a future life who just hasn't realized it yet. Or you could go even more basic than that. Radical hospitality is simply recognizing the common humanity we share with all people. It is seeing the modern day leper or tax collector as being a part of the same human race, and not pulling back because of other differences we may have. It is about welcoming at the level of the heart and mind the full being of

the stranger. It is ironic that St. Benedict, the saint the current Pope chose as his namesake, really has nailed the foundational teaching of humanism: recognize the basic humanity in all people even and especially when it is hard to do so.

How do we do this? I am a pragmatist; I always want to find a way to use or practice these good ideas on Sunday morning. One thing you can do can happen in the next few minutes. Take a risk at coffee hour this morning and talk to someone you have never met before. They don't necessarily have to be a newcomer or visitor; although that would be very nice. There is an old saying that everyone is on the Membership Committee. This is a particularly important saying in a large church. It can be intimidating to be around so many people for the first time. Talk to someone new this Sunday and every Sunday. Someone set a cushion out for you, be sure to set a cushion out for the next person. Remember someone talked to you at your first coffee hour. You may not be able to thank them directly. So reflect the generosity and compassion that was shown to you on your first Sunday here by passing it along to someone else.

That is good hospitality, but it isn't quite to the level of radical hospitality. For that we must take the risk of truly listening to another person and possibly being transformed by what we hear. The best way to do this, I have found, is through small groups. They should literally be open; put that cushion out for the new person. They are welcoming to

both the stranger and the person you know well. But be careful. The person you have seen at coffee hour may not have shared their way of seeing things with you to their fullest. You could be surprised by what you find even in the most familiar face. These are groups that should be especially open to the visitor, the newcomer, the doubter, the fringe person, the one just testing things out. Who better to receive a warm welcome?! Who better to recognize their basic humanity in all its rich detail without asking anything from them? Small groups are a fantastic spiritual practice that does not require a specific theological commitment. It does not matter what you believe about listening to others and making them feel welcome. What matters is what happens to you when you do it.

In many ways, radical hospitality is a function of our first principle: respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It is not the inherent worth and dignity of some people. Not the inherent worth and dignity of people who have pledged or joined a committee. It is not even the inherent worth and dignity of the people who look and talk as we do. It is broader than that. It includes everyone.

May we be brave in our welcoming and courageous in our love for the strangers among us. And may we always remember the basic humanity of every person we meet. Amen Blessed Be.