

This Way

David Weiss

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Writing, and in particular composing a sermon, can be transformative. After this exercise, I rarely end up thinking what I thought at the beginning of the exercise, or what I thought I thought. Anyhow, here's what I think, I think.

I am convinced that I'm just hearing the same sermon week after week - and the only variation is how the presenter spins the message. Or alternatively, maybe I'm just hearing what I want to hear, over and over; not hearing what I don't want to hear. In any event, the theme I've been locked into during my 15 year membership here is that each of us is charged with figuring out the optimum way to operate, cooperate and thrive within this denomination, within this community, and apply those practices in our life outside of here. And concurrently how to apply something of our life outside of here - experiences and lessons learned - to our practices in church.

We are each a work in progress and and if we buy into the notion that we must change the world, we need to continuously discover and invent ourselves. My preoccupation with the meaning of "welcome" is a manifestation of that. This sermon is simply a snapshot ... a moment of thought.

When I was young (even younger than I am now) I read a number of tales by Mohammed Mrabet and other Moroccan storytellers, transcribed by Paul Bowles. Several aspects attracted me about these stories - that these storytellers were apparently illiterate, and that these accounts were of life in what were to me absolutely exotic landscapes, and most of all a pervasive sense of radical hospitality that I had never encountered. I dreamt of visiting Morocco and partaking of that unknown lifestyle. Maybe “dreamt” isn’t the right word - I was “scared” to visit Morocco and partake of that unknown lifestyle. I wanted to go, I was scared to go and I did **not** go to Morocco. I categorized Morocco as somehow (not sure exactly how) unsafe space.

Originally the point of this sermon was going to be to define exactly who is welcome, **here**, outside of here - and who’s not. That we make a lot of noise about welcoming everyone, but none of us really “welcomes” **everyone**; it’s just self-congratulatory **churchy talk** disguising a more accurate but less flattering description - that we “tolerate” everyone. For me, when you welcome a person, implied is that you enjoy being with them, hearing their story, or at least that you are receptive to them and their story. The act of welcoming is ideally an ongoing invitation to **interact**, and not an encumbrance on anyone. There is no threat. There is expectation of enrichment.

I was going to admit that I am selective about who I welcome here at church, and that I certainly wasn’t ready to become less discriminating about who’s welcome in my life outside church.

How are members of this church **obliged** to welcome the people around them? **And** - do I have to do anything special in order to be welcomed into this congregation? If so, which of us would enforce compliance? To become a member here, you don't have to undergo a background check. You don't need to know about my substance abuse, tax evasion, philandering, lies, and blatant behaviors which contradict this denomination's stated principles. We don't demand a listing of which websites you visit.

So could you - would you - **welcome** potentially the most despicable people you've known? In the apparent absence of a creed, what behaviors are necessary, acceptable, unacceptable?

Our mission is to transform the world through loving action. If that loving action is aimed only at "acceptable" easy-to-love people, what - who - are we transforming? Maybe our fear of the unknown - our fear of strangers - leads to frustration with and anger at behaviors we find offensive, but then do the mistakes we've made preclude our right - our ability - to welcome and be welcomed? Might we hang a sign on our door that reads "No Deplorables Allowed?"

Have we bitten off more than we can chew? Does Unitarian Universalism have a strong enough message to inspire **you** to experiment and reach beyond the familiar? Are you accessing all your powers - everything you know - to encourage others and thus transform the world? How are we

motivating members and prospective members to participate in the process? What might we be sacrificing when we attempt to create our version of a **safe** space?

We rely heavily on seven principles. They are guidelines and invite interpretation. We espouse that each of us is responsible for searching for answers to questions we find important. We trust one another - that each of us is actually doing that, using all the tools at our disposal. The search is not optional. Nor is your consideration of **any** of the seven principles.

As an atheist, I often question - and am questioned about - why I attend church. My head is inhabited by neverending questions. "Why does anything that happens here matter? How might I apply the seven principles? If some people are not welcome in my life, how can I say I believe in everyone's inherent worth and dignity? How do I transform the world through loving action?"

And **for me** the answer is - wait for it, wait for it - **the process itself - questioning - exploring**. Because for me regular attendance at any organization that presents a tradition or routine - but offers little or **no** opportunity to search and explore - would be unfulfilling.

My wife and I live with two cats, Begonia and Tippy. First thing every morning I stumble into the kitchen to fill their bowls with water and make sure they have food. Invariably I am greeted by Begonia with quiet little meows. She blocks my passage, indicating, I imagine, that she wants

attention. I learned that she likes me to pick her up and hold her for a minute or two. It is as close to an expression of “Good morning” as we can get. She purrs and purrs. It makes me happy. Welcome Begonia.

At night, every night, Tippy climbs into bed with us. She climbs into bed because we set up steps - Tippy would otherwise struggle to leap into the bed. One thing I forgot to mention is that Tippy often climbs into bed at 3am. And walks across my stomach to position herself between Kathi and me. Welcome. We hear her - I **feel** her - and I learned that she likes me to pet her for a minute or two and she settles down and purrs and purrs. We have an understanding. I’m not sure exactly why she does this night after night, but I’m sure there’s a reason. And sometimes on a cold night I’ll lift the covers for her and she crawls under. Welcome Tippy.

Although we don’t need to know **your** details, past or present, the nature and depth of my relationship with you governs my ability to welcome you in a meaningful way. To welcome you, I guess I’d actually need to talk with you. What will you share? What will you withhold? In order to be welcomed properly, you must be accessible.

A few years ago I travelled to Morocco. I mean I really did - not in a dream but accompanied by my wife and a group of friends, many of whom attend this church. It was not the drunken exuberant ramble I envisioned when I was young. Instead, it was a tightly scheduled and controlled itinerary with a reputable company, meals and tour guide included.

So ... it was an important holiday and we were on our way through the High Atlas Mountains, much of the countryside was blanketed with people on their knees, praying. After a short walk in the mountains, we were to board the bus and head back to an oasis, after which we were to visit with a family, with whom we'd eat a meal. But we were about ten days into the trip, and I wanted to slow down, just stop and think about what I was experiencing. I wanted to draw.

I convinced the guide to have the bus drop me off in the high desert - across from a large medina - where I would sit and draw for awhile. The bus would pick me up on its way back from the oasis. It seemed like a good idea, until I hopped off the bus, when the driver unceremoniously shut the doors and drove off leaving me alone in the desert. Did I mention I had no cellphone?

I started looking around for a place to sit and draw. No suitable spot was apparent. Dealing with early stages of panic, deciding what to do, I heard a voice saying, "This way." I saw no one but heard the English words, "This way. Come this way." Finally, up the hill I spotted a man in a striped djellaba motioning for me to "Come this way."

"No no" I responded. My feeble attempt at explanation, "I just want to draw!" brandishing my little sketchpad and box of crayons held together with a rubberband I lose at least three times a week.

“Yes yes, please,” he pointed to a concrete slab. “When you have finished, please join me for tea,” and he began the climb to his home.

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From the concrete slab I had a great view of the valley, the mountains and the blocky medina. I was also on the path from the road up the hill. A steady stream of visitors passed, on their way to the home of the man in the striped djellaba. To each I smiled and said, “Eid Mubarak” (happy holiday) and each responded but I have no idea what they were saying - except for their smiles. Then a father and two little girls - maybe 4 and 6 years old - came up the path. Thinking the little girls might be interested in my drawings, I held up my sketchbook and looked questioningly at the father. He whispered to the younger girl and she approached. I started to turn a page to show her a drawing, but before I could, she leant forward and kissed me on the cheek.

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Eid Mubarak.

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Does Unitarian Universalism have a strong enough message to cause you to examine your conduct, energize you to experiment and reach beyond the familiar? Are you summoning all your powers - everything you know - to model behaviors and exhibit self-confidence, encourage others and thus transform the world? What might we be sacrificing when we attempt to create our version of a **safe** space?

I've noticed that I'm more protective of my private life than I am here at church. Why? I think I'm more prone to welcome people who share my interests, who listen to me and laugh at my jokes. I am welcoming of people who model behaviors to which I aspire. Am I listening hard enough, am I smiling enough, or am I more concerned with myself? What am I protecting?

Soon I found myself climbing to the house, then sitting on the bench to which I was directed. "What do they call you," he asked, as a young woman appeared with two glasses of tea.

"My name is David... and you?"

"Omar." He looked at me carefully, then said, "David - Dawid - Duvid... you are Jewish?"

I believe I can usually tell when someone is welcoming me, versus when someone is merely tolerating me, the difference between "We're really glad you're with us," and "Show up if you want to." The act of welcoming requires lots of personal interaction, particularly lots of listening.

We sat and talked about Morocco and the United States, family and jobs, this and that, for a couple of hours. Omar told me that once upon a time Jews lived over yonder ... over yonder. Omar's daughter emerged from the house to serve more mint tea, and cookies. I remember there was a

cool breeze. Serendipity - the occurrence and development of events in a happy or beneficial way. An extraordinary coincidence - I had stopped wondering whether the tour bus would pick me up.

I hope you always end up with more questions than answers. Welcome.