

The Purpose of A UU Congregation
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Steven Shick writes:

“The board meeting of our inner-city church was going reasonably well. We had worked through half the agenda when a disheveled man entered the room through an unlocked door. One of the board members got up quickly and with a polite firmness told the man there was a private meeting going on and that the building was not open to the public at this time. Pausing only to hand the man a list of places he could go for help, the board member closed and locked the door, then took his seat. A potentially disruptive situation had been handled with appropriate kindness, or so it seemed.

The next day, I became increasingly unsettled by what had happened. The momentary discomfort of the street person’s arrival had passed – and with it an opportunity to practice compassionate hospitality. Oh, there were reasons enough to justify handling the situation as we did. After all, we were running an institution that did good works in the community. The board member had not only politely dismissed the man, but had handed him a list of places we had carefully prepared.

But the scene still gnawed at my heart. For while we had practiced a small act of kindness, we failed to open our hearts to the stranger. Perhaps we could have interrupted our meeting for five minutes, given him a cup of coffee, and invited him to sit in the entrance way a while before sending him away. One of us could have sat and listened to him for a few moments. Perhaps we could have made sure he arrived safely at the place we sent him. The list of missed opportunities clicked off in my mind.”

He concludes: “The problem that evening was not that the door was unlocked, but that our hearts remained closed. Institutions, even those dedicated to helping others, often separate and divide us from one another. They absolve us from practicing bold acts of hospitality that can save us from the numbing effects of radical disconnection. The spiritual practice most needed in our full-agenda lives is compassionately connecting with others where and when we meet them.”

Even before this last year of Zoom Sunday services, without a building, UUCD services and meetings were not prone to interruption, or at least not interruption from strangers in need.

It may seem like living our Unitarian faith, living our principles, would encourage us to notice those moments and opportunities to practice the compassion and justice we preach. But I suspect that at the end of the day, we are as prone as other people of faith to the tendency of institutional business to distract and numb us to the potential connections on our doorstep.

What makes a congregation different than a social justice organization, a social club, a friend group that enjoys getting together?

Perhaps it is the old adage “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” that has been used in a variety of contexts. It actually originated in the early 1900s with comedian Finley Peter Dunne to describe, humorously, one of the many roles of the newspaper. But it was quickly recognized for its application to religion. To comfort the afflicted — whether afflicted in mind, body, or spirit — is certainly a common element of religions worldwide which encourage, inspire and even require care for people who hurting, ill, and vulnerable. And that second part, to afflict the comfortable, is present in every scriptural text and religion that I have encountered. It may not be the primary reason most of us show up for each week, but it is nevertheless an important part of any spiritual community, to stir and challenge us - for how else can transformation and growth happen if not through some discomfort?

This may be more true still when we have diversity as a value and goal, as we do as Unitarian Universalists. I sincerely hope this community is and will always be a place where comfort can be sought, where we extend compassion to one another in the midst of life’s struggles and sorrows. But if we hope to be comfortable all of the time, not just comforted but comfortable... if we hope that every speaker will inspire us, every song will be one which we like the lyrics and melody, every person will be our best friend, we will miss out not only on the transformation possible in our own lives, but also the transformation that may be possible for us as a congregation as we grow and welcome new people to this community. True diversity beyond superficial differences rarely comes without discomfort. And even similarity can be disturbing, when what we see in another is some of our own faults reflected back to us in unbecoming ways.

Rongdau, a Taiwanese Buddhist nun who was also a professor of Curtis’, once suggested that monasteries are designed to be annoying: narrow hallways, limited shower times, elbows knocking at the dinner table. In other words, that the everyday irritations of living in close quarters with other people, literally and figuratively bumping into to one another regularly, is not accidental but rather intentional, and an integral part of the spiritual work of a monk or a nun.

I wonder what it would be like to put a new slogan on our website: “Come to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Durham for the spiritual opportunity of frequent irritation and discomfort!” Excellent growth strategy, I’m sure. But more seriously, none of us have chosen the monastery life, and may not have the spiritual maturity for that kind of day-in, day-out patience living with so many other people. If we all lived together under one roof, I suspect the balance of comfort and discomfort would tip. Yet we do choose to come to this place, this community for insight and friendship, for renewal and comfort, and for a decent dose of discomfort, too.

We so often speak of this community as a family, and it rings true, a big extended family. But there are limitations to that metaphor. In his book *Welcoming the Stranger*, Patrick Keifert challenges the common notion of churches as family, arguing that a sense of

family can be intrinsically exclusive, turning a public space into a private one. And I can't help but think of the many challenges of family, even the most loving ones. For anyone who has had the experience of entering a new family, perhaps most commonly through partnership or marriage, it can be like finding oneself in the deep end of the swimming pool with unspoken customs and culture and the only guide a partner who is accustomed to those waters, who may or may not be a helpful translator. Sometimes belonging in a new family comes swiftly and with great joy, sometimes slowly and hard won, sometimes never fully at all.

And what of belonging in a congregation?

Unitarian youth at conferences or "cons" have a practice called "Robbie's Rule." A couple of decades old now, the rule originated with a young man named Robbie who advocated for every circle of conversation or play that a space be left for someone to join. Once filled, a new space is created so there is always room for one more.

I am grateful that this congregation is a loving, warm, welcoming one. I am grateful it offers both friendship and a sense of family. Someone wise once said, it is here that we are loved just as we are, and too much to let us stay that way. I love this community and all of you just as you are, and also love this community too much to let us stay the same always. And so it behooves us to consider how we might grow in our capacity for inclusion and welcome... not from a place of shame or blame but from a deep love for this community, love for the people here, now, and love for the people who may yet be here to fill the empty places in our circle.

And so may we lovingly and oh so intentionally create those places;
May we welcome in the stranger - not just the one who fits in right away and feels like "one of us," but the stranger who is different, the stranger who challenges our understanding of ourselves and our community.
May we offer comfort amidst affliction and affliction amidst comfort, knowing both are abundant in our world,
And may we cultivate and celebrate a love that always makes room for more.

Blessed be.

Amen.