

Radical Hospitality Part 2

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Back in November I preached the first sermon about Radical Hospitality, which invited us to both consider **and practice** Radical Hospitality as revolutionary welcome, beyond just being polite and as a form of disruption in a world where the marginalized and oppressed among us have the door shut on them all too often.

This sermon is part 2—a continued exploration how we can manifest Radical Hospitality more deeply in our own lives and the life of this fellowship. So, I wonder how well you've done with some of the suggestions from the last time. I have seen many of you showing up in the community to witness to our commitment to radical hospitality on a variety of issues. I was so moved by those of you who stuck it out in the rain for the Refugee vigil back in December.

Now that the legislative season is beginning (tomorrow in fact), many more opportunities for witness and advocacy are popping up from welcoming refugees to add the words, to interrupting Islamophobia. We'll do our best to publicize these opportunities as we hear about them and I hope you will continue to show up for Radical Hospitality in our community on behalf of Unitarian Universalism.

There were also some simpler suggestions I proposed for practicing radical hospitality right here on Sunday mornings. I wonder if any of you were bold and invited someone you did not know to lunch or coffee. I know that Rick & Becky Groff did so and felt so strongly about the experience they have volunteered to host a monthly coffee for newcomers (visitors and members) at Moxie Java after the first service. They'll begin this month on January 31st and you can look for more details in our weekly announcements. I would love to see more volunteers who would be willing to host something similar after the second service and perhaps additional Sundays during the month. Isn't this exciting!

There are two theological concepts at the core of Radical Hospitality. The first lies in our historical roots in Universalism. Early Universalists believed in universal salvation, that if humanity was considered to be created in the image of the divine, and if that divine source was good, then no one could be condemned for eternity—all were saved. Our contemporary interpretation of Universalism leans more toward the concept of Universal love, that all are deemed worthy of love and dignity (you can hear the echoes of our first principle). The invisible thread in all of this is the feeling that reconciliation is always possible, there is always a way to return again in love and repair our relationships. And we need to remember that because we human beings are a fallible bunch.

The second theological core is that of Covenant, the sacred promises we make about how we will be in relationship with one another. Also found in our early Congregationalist history, covenants were a form of self-government churches used to outline their expectations of membership, authority, and ministry as independent and ecclesiastically sovereign (or having

no hierarchical body setting the rules). While Unitarian Universalism has changed and grown theologically over the years, the most consistent ideology we have adhered to is that of covenant.

We pride ourselves in being a creedless faith, dismissing any test of belief and emphasizing relationship, mutuality, and becoming our best selves. “Deeds not creeds.” Actions over beliefs. Even the language of our 7 principles begins with the words, “We covenant to affirm and promote.” Notice the active language there “affirm and promote,” rather than believe. Our principles are guiding values about how we will be with one another and the world, not a set of fixed beliefs.

As our reading so beautifully captured, “A covenant invites relationship, it seeks harmony and a shared voice, it gives authority to shared intention, and a covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives.” I love that imagery of covenant as a dance of co-creation. It acknowledges the special contributions each of us has to offer, and the give and take, the leading and following—the flow that comes when we commit ourselves to beloved community.

So we honor these deep historical roots each time we create a covenant together and we do this often in the life of the church. We ask our small groups, chalice circles and affinity groups to create covenants. Our board of directors created a beautiful covenant this year. And at the start of each church year our children and youth create their own covenants in the Religious Exploration classes.

Creating a covenant in any context models our church governance (being about mutual agreement and commitment) and reminds us all that we have a voice in our church experience; that we are co-creators of our collective experience and that we affirm the values of right relationship, trust, and love. We are connected by love—that same universal love affirmed by our forebears.

A while ago and far way there was a new little church. It was a growing church and they were very excited about what it was becoming and how it might grow. But it was also struggling because the people weren’t very nice to one another. They fought about how to do things and about leadership. They fought about money. There were some that had big egos and thought they knew the right way things should be handled. The wealthier folks weren’t all that thrilled to be sharing their space with the poor folks. But their church taught them that all should be included so they begrudgingly tolerated them. It was not a very hospitable place. Eventually one of their founders got fed up with their shenanigans and wrote them a letter and basically told them to knock it off and love one another.

Here is what it said: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, **but do not have love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love**, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may

boast, **but do not have love**, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **It bears all things**, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love"

You've probably heard these words before, they are a favorite reading at weddings. This is the text from the Christians Scriptures the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verses 1 – 7 and verse 13. But they were not written for couples, they were written by the apostle Paul for the church in Corinth as a stern reprimand to remember the core teachings of their faith above all else. Love one another as you wish to be loved. Your passion and energy will not make a difference if you cannot be in "right-relationship" with one another. Because for Paul and the early church, that is what being Christ-like was all about.

And this concept of Right Relationship is central to our covenantal faith too, with love at its core. Right Relationship is about being in alignment with our covenant and our relationship with one another. So, for example, if we say *we covenant to freely explore our values and honor our theological diversity as a source of communal strength*, and then we encounter the experience of shaming someone's prayer practice with the erroneous assumption that UUs don't pray (that's just a Christian thing). We would be out of right relationship.

Or perhaps if our covenant says *we will communicate with kindness and support* and we encounter communication that feels at odds with that, we are out of covenant and out of right relationship.

Many churches go through a process to create a Covenant of Right Relations for the whole congregational body. A formal document that expresses their commitments about how they will **be** together; how they will treat one another; what is important to them. This fellowship does not yet have one and that may be a worthy endeavor for us in the next few years.

Because right relationship is foundational to practicing authentic Radical Hospitality within our community and the outside world. The two go hand-in hand.

But, what happens when we fall out of covenant, when we miss the mark? When we stumble and fail? What happens when that human fallibility comes into play and we notice ourselves judging, becoming resentful, or hurting one another (kind of like the church in Corinth)?

Or harder still, what happens when we don't notice? Very often our unconscious choices and behavior can end up hurting people or just driving them away and we are not even aware. Because this WILL happen. We will step on each other once in a while, we will say dumb things, and conflict and tension will arise, that is the nature of systems and organizations and people.

It is what we do in those moments that matters.

Covenants by their nature are aspirational, they speak of our highest aspirations about who we are and who we hope to become. And when we fall out of covenant and out of right relationship, we have an equal responsibility to lovingly call each other back into right relationship. When we openly acknowledge that differences and conflict will naturally arise and make a commitment to healthy management and resolution (as opposed to avoiding them and letting them fester), that keeps us in right relationship and keeps the congregation healthy.

So let me ask you, how many of you actually enjoy conflict management? Not many of us do, we'd rather avoid it and hope it goes away. But doing so could potentially lead to festering resentment and deeper tears in the fabric of the community.

So what if we reframed conflict management as a practice of reconciliation? Remember the flip side of that Universalist theology is that reconciliation is always possible. When we engage in reconciliation, we invite a change that can transform the relationship. A practice of reconciliation (notice it is called a practice, it is a competency that takes commitment and work to develop); the practice of reconciliation holds right relationship at its core; that we hold one another in high esteem and are accountable for communication and new behavior. Reconciliation asks for a commitment to be in conversation, to listen deeply, with goodwill, and to focus on learning and growth over the issue at hand.

And, we even claim this in our new member ceremony. During the affirmation we read together, this congregation spoke these words, "We will not always live up to our ideals. And, when we fall short we invite you to stay in relationship with us and help us more fully bring alive the spirit of love." That is a beautiful statement of right relationship with the possibility of reconciliation.

Yes it is risky. Yes it is hard. No one likes to hear that they have hurt someone or done something that has caused conflict. We can never be certain how others will react and it requires we own our part in the breakdown of the relationship or event.

Making a commitment to being in covenant and right relationship can replace the ripples of resentment with the ripples of reconciliation which have benefits that extend far beyond any one issue and is in harmony with the belief that we all have a stake in creating beloved community.

We do it because we want to commit to an authentic embodiment of Radical Hospitality that will permeate our individual lives, the beautiful tapestry of this community and our commitment healing and transformation in our world.

May it be so. Amen

SILENCE

HYMN #126 Come Thou Font of Every Blessing

BENEDICTION

May we seek to embody the love run deep in this faith
May we covenant with one another to hold that love above all else,
to seek the fount of blessings among us,
To practice reconciliation and authentic radical hospitality
Within, among and beyond these walls

We extinguish the flame of our chalice but carry with us the flame of truth, justice and love that
all may feel welcome in this world. Go in peace.