

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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## Standing on the Side of Love

If it weren't for coffee shops, I don't think I could do this work. I read and study, naturally, but so much of what evolves into my worship services originates or develops in conversations that take place across small tables during quiet meetings with friends, either on purpose or by wonderful accident...friends who have a story to tell. As I have told you before, I believe that it's healing work to tell one's story, and holy work to listen to another person's story. It is to some extent because of a few of those stories, and because of the good people who told them, that I became an advocate for the Welcoming Congregation program years ago. I would like to share again some fragments of those stories with you this morning, to serve as examples of why I am convinced that every Unitarian Universalist congregation needs to engage in the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation.

The first story got told over lunch, with a friend that was in seminary with me. He was telling me about his younger days and his struggle with alcoholism. He's sober now, but he went through some dark times to get to that point. "What the church taught me," he said, "from the time I was a kid, was that not even God could love me. There was nothing in me to love, and nothing I could do about it. I

knew I was different, but I didn't know how to be anything else. It was awful. After I got older, the drinking helped."

Not even God could love him.

What if there had been a church for him...a church that could have helped? A church instead of substance abuse? There was, of course...what if he had *known* about it? He found the Unitarian Universalist faith eventually, on his path toward healing. I wish he had found us sooner.

Another friend, another time, another coffee shop told another story. "I knew the stuff I heard in church was wrong," he told me. "I didn't believe it. I went to church with my parents, but it didn't mean anything to me." He said he thought he must have had a different idea about God from very early on. "I used to talk to the moon," he said. "but not God." Like my other friend, this man knew as a child that he was different, but he also had some innate sense of his own value. What was at work there, I wondered. How was it that one child knew he was good and another child believed he was not? Even the friend with a grounded sense of his own inherent worth and dignity was so glad to discover the Unitarian Universalist church as an adult, so relieved to have his identity affirmed by the church, to be embraced by the church.

So this is one obvious reason why we become Welcoming Congregations: to make ourselves and our principles known to people who don't know about us, and who need us. Even so, there are concerns expressed about why we do this. One of the comments

we hear most often when we talk about becoming Welcoming Congregations is, “We’re already welcoming, aren’t we? And why just gay people? What about African Americans, and immigrants, and people with special needs, and all kinds of other groups that are below the line of privilege. We don’t have any special programs for welcoming them.”

That’s right, we don’t, and here’s why: all these people are ones who have church already. African American people, even in the worst times of chattel slavery in the U.S., had church. They had to have it in secret, but they had church. They knew and relied on the love of God. The Civil Rights movement in the United States, in fact, emerged out of the church. Immigrants have church, people with special needs have church. It’s BGLT people who have been excluded from church, who have been told that they don’t belong in church. Or they’re told, of course you’re welcome to come, but you can’t be ordained as clergy even if you feel a powerful call, or if you *are* ordained as clergy, you can’t be in a loving, mutual relationship with the person of your choice. If you’re a lay leader you can’t read from the pulpit, and it would be best if you don’t let it be known that you’re gay at church because we disapprove of that. You can come, but we aren’t going to honor your identity. Is that what fills a person’s need when that person needs church? Where does a BGLT person go when one’s heart and mind and spirit yearn for a spiritual home?

Conversation about why we become Welcoming Congregations could easily take the entire morning, and it’s important to have that conversation. It’s also important, though, to think together about *how*

we do it, what the process is like. The Welcoming Congregation committee will offer a series of workshops, and details about that will be coming. We value everyone's participation in the workshops, and the more people who participate, the more meaningful the workshops will be. They have different themes and invite lots of introspection, both individually and collectively. They are not specifically educational; they are not designed primarily to teach us information about being bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender. When we participate in the workshops, we have the opportunity to unearth for ourselves, and possibly for each other, what we already know or believe, and also how we came to know or believe that. We're UUs, we're good with language, and we have the UU principles to guide us, so we are very skilled at saying what we are "supposed" to think. In fact, though, sometimes what we *really* think is living right there inside us, possibly in conflict with what we are supposed to think, and it takes some shaking up for us to even realize it's there. These workshops can provide some of that shaking up, and that's good. At this point we aren't trying to make ourselves think correctly; rather, we want to find out and be able to name what we really think. Once we can make that speakable, even if it's just to ourselves, we know where to start.

In the course of attending General Assembly, district events, ministers and religious educators meetings, and other conferences and gatherings over the years, I have run into lots of people involved with Welcoming Congregations, and I have heard lots of stories from other people whose congregations were doing the work or were

considering it. These examples I'm about to share can demonstrate how what we really think can be different from what we *think* we think. Following a Welcoming Congregations worship service, someone received a fairly long email which concluded with the statement that the writer did not think the congregation should become a Welcoming Congregation. The email listed facts about AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, and asked how the reader thought a child would feel living in a home where there were multiple sex partners going in and out all the time? The person who wrote that email clearly had some fairly strong feelings about homosexuality, and not a very clear understanding of what it means to be a Welcoming Congregation. Although AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is a devastating problem, it's not directly related to homosexuality or Welcoming Congregations, and neither are multiple sex partners. The work of Welcoming Congregations is concerned with understanding and affirming identity, not behavior. This is a crucial distinction.

In another instance, a Welcoming Congregation committee wanted to plan an event to take place in conjunction with National Coming Out Day. They publicized in advance that there would be a table outside the sanctuary on a Sunday morning with materials so that everyone could make badges to wear in support of their BGLT relatives and friends. With the absolute best of intentions, with their hearts open, people participated enthusiastically that Sunday morning. It took a gay member of the congregation to notice and point out that there was never a mention of what kind of badges BGLT people themselves were supposed to make. Although they wanted to

do something supportive and affirming, even the Welcoming Congregation committee missed the fact that their activity was for BGLT allies; they had not included the actual BGLT people in their plans.

This example of well-intentioned people messing up highlights for us the fact that even in a devoted community of faith, our flaws are just as ordinary and normal as anybody else's. We serve each other and the world best by presuming good intentions and kindness. There will be times in the Welcoming Congregation process when we feel frustrated, disappointed, anxious, or angry, and that will be typical and it is okay. Patience, forbearance, and our UU principles will carry us forward in this effort, and they will sustain us on the path toward justice, equity, and compassion.

This week I read an article by a woman who helps other women start small businesses, and her motto was something like, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." For Welcoming Congregations, the main thing is dismantling oppression. We feel various ways about BGLT identity and BGLT concerns (or at least our understanding of BGLT concerns), and we need to know and be able to name how we feel. But how we feel is not the main thing. The main thing is dismantling oppression.

The main thing is letting justice roll down like water.

The main thing is standing on the side of love.

And so may it be.