

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

Grace Note based on story by Fred Rogers

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Everyone knows who Mr. Rogers was, right? He hosted a wonderful children's T.V. program which was set in a neighborhood.

He was also a minister and I want to tell you about something he wrote for a scholarly minister's journal a few years before he died, about being a neighbor.

When he was a boy in Pennsylvania, he grew up in a wonderful neighborhood and had a very close neighbor who was like a grandmother to him – Mama Bell Frampton. She let the neighborhood kids come in her kitchen for snacks and Freddy did that often as a little boy. Whenever he needed a treat, he just knocked on her back door. He called it “toast sticks”.

One time, when he was 5 or 6 years old, she taught him how to make toast sticks: putting the bread in the toaster, buttering it and spreading jam and then carefully cutting it into 4 long “sticks”. He knew that, 65 years later, it was an odd memory to treasure, but she had made him feel proud of himself and that he was trusted, as well as cared for, and loved.

Mama Bell died not long after she taught little Fred Rogers to make “toast sticks” and he thought maybe she sensed that he needed not just love, but help with going forward on his own, when she showed him that “recipe”. That early experience with a good neighbor influenced Fred Rogers to promote neighborliness, especially for children.

He finished the article with: “How grateful I am to her ... and to every other ‘neighbor’ I've ever had who has pointed, ever so gently, to the One who cares about us most of all.”

Now I need a volunteer to help me tell the other side of Mr. Rogers' story. You only have to do a little talking – some minor improvisation – and I'll mostly be telling Mama Bell's side of the story, as I imagine it.

Your role is as a member of this congregation, which now magically exists in the childhood neighborhood of Mr. Rogers, and we'll pretend that Mama Bell Frampton regularly attends UUFR. But, Mama Bell hasn't been here in 3 weeks and you want to check up on her. Maybe you're on the Membership Committee or you are in the Caring Circle for this month, or maybe you're just a friendly neighborly type, but you're concerned that she hasn't been here. So I'll be Mama Bell and you call me.

Oh, I'm not feeling well. Just had little Freddy Rogers in and I was hurting, so I got him to make the snack on his own. I just sat there. You know Freddy, don't you?

No? He's my neighbor boy who always stops by for a treat – really cute little five year old. Mind you, it's a blessed bother when he comes by, if you know what I mean. Sometimes he stops in and all I have is enough bread for breakfast in the morning, but I make him toast sticks anyway and have to go out early to get groceries the next morning. Once he came by as I was heading out the door to my bridge game – well, I missed it that week. Another time I just wanted to see the end of my favorite soap, but I stop whatever I am doing for Freddy. Oh, for other kids, too, usually, but Freddy is special. You know, he gave me a hug after my sister died, and that's not easy for a little boy to do. He always picks me a dandelion bouquet. The first time I met him he was outside crying, with a cut, and I was closer than home, so I bandaged him up. I'm afraid he's rough and tumble, tracks mud on my floor, and spills his milk at least once a month, a bother every time he's here, but a blessing too. I'm glad he's my neighbor.

I've got to go now – I need to go lie down Thanks so much for calling. It's good to know that people are looking out for me. I'll make an appointment with the doctor today. Do you think you could drive me? I don't feel very sure of myself right now. ... Thanks – you're a good neighbor too.

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

A Vermonter once told me this joke: What is a Yankee? To the rest of the world, a Yankee is an American, from the United States. To Americans, a Yankee is a Northerner. To Northerners, a Yankee is someone from New England. To New Englanders, a Yankee is a Vermonter. To Vermonters, a Yankee is someone who eats pie for breakfast.

Language, Mary Pipher wrote in the UU World a few years ago, can be used to create an “other”, to objectify and depersonalize. In this joke, it is not *too* dehumanizing, but it still casts the Yankee in the “not really us” arena, and when you are in the South, there can be a quite serious delineation of “we” versus those “damn Yankees”. But when I lived as a Southerner in the North, believe me, it works the other way too – I have heard many people, even friends, refer in a disparaging way to Southerners, as though we were all a little dumber, and more bigoted, than Northerners. Both Southerners and Yankees can be “the other”, the stranger, to each other. And once you make someone into the other, the one who would eat pie for breakfast, a different set of rules for civilized behavior applies, as Mary Pipher explained. They are the stranger, the alien, and not the neighbor.

The ideal neighbor, on the other hand, is from Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, which apparently Fred Rogers actually grew up in – a community of people who care for and take care of each other. Maybe children are better at being neighbors and inspiring grownups to be neighbors. I remember my aunt saying about her grandson, “That child doesn't know any strangers. He turns everyone into a friend.”

The ideal neighbor is not easy to come by, though, in our fast-paced, moveable society, in which people are more likely to be perched in front of their screens, than to sit outside their screen doors on their front porch. We often do not know the people who are in our neighborhoods. I remember a long-ago episode from the '60s TV show, "That Girl" – remember the Marlo Thomas character? She played an aspiring New York actress who, on this episode, was chosen to be on a game show and found out that she'd be asked questions about her neighbors. She began introducing herself to those who lived nearby, and doing nice things for the folks in her apartment building, who had mostly been strangers to her. Instead, the game show focused on the neighbors from her childhood home, and she quickly dredged up memories of folks like the librarian, the teacher, the grocer and the family down the street, although I believe she was worried she'd mixed up their names. Who is our neighbor? Do we even know?

Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan begins with the lawyer asking the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Actually, first he asked how he could have eternal life, how could he live a meaningful life that would guarantee him a place in the glorious Kingdom that he believed was coming. To us, the question might be: how can you really live from a place of well-being and embrace the fullness of life? We'd probably answer with some talk about love. Jesus answers as any rabbi at the time might have, with the Great Commandment of Love – love God; love your neighbor as yourself – that's how you have a meaningful life.

Simple, but the lawyer wants to know, well, who is my neighbor? Who do I have a duty to treat well, to love? Is it the person who lives within my village, or my region, or do I have to include all of Israel? Surely not beyond the borders, for a stranger means

an alien, someone who is suspicious and may well be an enemy. A neighbor was an important concept involving covenant in Biblical times, and it was a legally codified concept – in certain ways, one was required to act better toward a neighbor than a stranger or alien. This was not really a rhetorical question from the lawyer. Who is the neighbor, who do I have to treat well, and who is the stranger, whom I can at least ignore, and who does not have the full protection of the law, nor have the full expectation of kindness?

The parable Jesus tells is surprising to those who heard it, and it should surprise us as well, but first we have to know some things. The priest and the Levite, both religious officials, who walk by without helping the fallen and suffering man, were probably not just too busy or too important to be bothered, although that might have been part of it. Their duties were many and included remaining “clean” for ritual. One of the things that would make you unclean, was to touch a dead body, and perhaps this human mound in the ditch seemed so “other” as to probably not be alive. Jesus doesn’t have just anybody walk by and not help – he picks people who usually do help, but have an excuse for not being a compassionate neighbor to the stranger. It was a bigger issue for the priest than the Levite, who only had to observe ritual cleanness when he was on duty, and the scripture implies he was leaving Jerusalem, leaving the Temple and his job, and so did not need to remain ritually clean. Ah, but the man in the ditch is clearly different, not one of them, and perhaps they are just using their religious offices as an excuse for not doing what they do not want to do – stop and help a stranger. After all, he could be dangerous, or, the ones who beat him up might still be around. What a scary situation – who would want to stop?

But the guy in the ditch is not the real stranger of the story, for the man who stops is even more of an alien – a Samaritan – someone from a reviled group. Worse than a damn Yankee or a dumb Southerner, a Samaritan was a despised minority from Samaria, related to the Jews, although considered heretical. Which groups usually hate each other the most? Those who are similar in ways, maybe even related, but have radically different beliefs, as in this case. If the late Rev. Jerry Falwell had wanted to figure out who was the equivalent of a Samaritan for him in today's world, (Falwell, the minister who responded to September 11th by saying [quote]"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"[endquote] {What an abomination!}) one might wonder if Falwell's Samaritan-equivalent would have been a feminist pagan lesbian Unitarian Universalist from his home state, but this alien area of the Northern Neck. Somebody in this room could well have been who Falwell should have been picturing as the Good Samaritan, if he really wanted to understand Jesus. And the Samaritan for us, for Unitarian Universalists, might look like a nearby evangelical preacher who condemns many behaviors and beliefs that we support and embrace, or whoever we really have trouble considering as one of us.

In a different Bible story, Jesus creates quite the scandal when he talks to a Samaritan woman at the well. She is a woman alone, a woman whose life choices would be harshly judged, and if that isn't enough, she is a Samaritan, from a despised people. With such a completely "other" stranger, civilized behavior demanded the avoidance of

such a person, yet Jesus was drinking her water and talking about her life, and giving her guidance about how to find greater meaning. Think about who represents the stranger for you, and imagine, could you meet at the well for a drink from the living waters, or even just at a coffeehouse and have a chat over some lattes? Perhaps you could talk together at a Socrates Café, as some of you actually have done, thanks to organizers in this congregation.

When a stranger is despised, he or she tends to avoid the despisers, those who hate him or her, minimally for reasons of safety and dignity, but usually also because the despising cuts both ways. In Jesus' story, the Samaritan should have prudently walked right on by as well, and not just for the reasons we considered already for the Levite and the priest. The Samaritan would have been wary of a Jewish man who might have friends come round to lash him, or take him to the authorities for breaking the boundaries that separated them.

Instead, the Samaritan stops. He helps. And perhaps it is partly because he understands what it is like to be a stranger, to be avoided and despised. His woundedness exposes to him the needs of the wounded, and moves him to compassion. This stranger Samaritan is the surprising hero. We don't often hear stories about heroes who belong to our stranger category, whether inner city drug dealers, or religious fundamentalists, or Louisiana swamp dwellers, or even those who eat pie for breakfast. The stranger doesn't often get to be the good guy in the stories people tell, but Jesus was like the Buddha in trying to wake people up, and he used surprising stories to do so.

Let me tell you a surprising 20th century story about neighbors. This is a true story about a homeless woman I met, but it is not the story you might expect, about me

helping her, me being the compassionate neighbor to her strangerliness. This skinny, homeless woman in Boston was compassionate to a needy, recent graduate of Harvard – that would be me. I was volunteering in her shelter at the time, Rosie’s Place.

It was a tough night, as usual. Some of the women were making trouble; there were never enough beds; and there was not enough of me to deal with all the crises. In the midst of the craziness, one of the homeless women did a simple thing. She took me downstairs to the basement where there was a room full of donated clothing for the women of the shelter, and she said she wanted to give me something. At the time I admit that I dressed quite poorly, less because I didn’t have much money, than because I was just plain slovenly. I admit I wasn’t comfortable with her offer of giving me clothes that were meant for the homeless, but those clothes did belong to the women of the shelter, and so they were hers to give to me.

She picked out pants from one box and a blouse from a bag, and they became a beautiful matching ensemble which fit me perfectly and brought out my coloring, and which I loved. I was being pampered, the way I’ve heard you are treated at high end clothing stores, with clothes selected especially for you. This homeless woman paid attention to my needs, though I hardly had been conscious of them myself. She spent time, effort, and the best of her worldly resources. And I could go back upstairs to all the problems, having been cared for and renewed.

When Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan as the good guy, or when I tell the story of a homeless woman as the compassionate one, it’s a reversal. We think of the stranger, the other, the alien, at best as that person to whom we should be decent, tolerant, even nice, and we almost expect a pat on the back for our kindness, but in the midst we still

have the sense of separation. We are the nice ones and they are the ones to whom we have to be nice.

Years ago, I took a high school church youth group to visit boys in a detention center, a meaningful field trip. We went a couple of times and took many adult chaperones, and they were also changed by the experience. I remember one older woman saying to us after the first trip that she suddenly was aware that she had been prejudiced against those youthful lawbreakers, and was glad to know them as human beings, and glad to have given them something good through our visit. She felt like a Good Samaritan to hurting kids down in the ditch of the detention center. Then after the second trip a deeper revelation came to the same woman. She said that one of the boys had helped her during that visit, and this had humbled and amazed her. She had an ah-hah moment when a criminal teenager turned out to also be a Good Samaritan! The boys were no longer strangers – they were neighbors, and neighbors are kind to us, as we are to them. The surprising neighbor who seemed like a stranger can be compassionate.

For that church woman, it didn't take much to change a stranger into a neighbor—about three hours over the course of two visits. Sometimes such a transformation is instantaneous, as when people face a common disaster and come together to help each other as a community in crisis. Do we even need an excuse to change a stranger into a neighbor? Aren't they really always a relative, sometimes under the disguise of someone who looks or sounds different from us, but who is really one of us? Are we not all one people? A neighbor is not defined by a person's attributes or address; a neighbor is the one who reaches out to the other in kindness. A neighbor is someone who approaches the

world with a radical inclusiveness, as Jesus tried to demonstrate, and as we try to do as Unitarian Universalists.

Sometimes we get side-tracked. We forget that we belong to each other and we remember the feeling of being a stranger, of alienation and loneliness. Even among ourselves as Unitarian Universalists, we can get it so wrong, and even among our own families, we have plenty of ways to notice our differences and decide that they make us strange, and, everyone else can seem pretty strange too, and this can keep us from acting like neighbors, from being kind to each other.

We belong to each other; all of us belong as neighbors, in all our varieties of being, despite all our feelings of strangeness, even if we eat pie for breakfast. (I know I've been there.) We belong to each other. Sometimes we meet in the ditch of suffering and other times we drink together at the well of living waters. We belong together. As Mr. Rogers said, "Won't you be my neighbor?" That question helps us to notice that neighborliness is both an invitation and a choice. Anyone can be a neighbor to anyone. So may we be neighbors, always. Amen.