Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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Naming Names

In our personal lives and in the life of the church, one challenge that we sometimes don't recognize is the need and the ability to observe what is real and call it by its true name. Why is this difficult and why does it matter? Join us and Sara Mackey to imagine what it looks like to name what's real.

Last month I was in the emergency room with a family I know, while the oldest member, the matriarch, was in the back being assessed after a fall. She was in declining health, and various children had received calls regarding her need for help over several weeks. On this week-end, all the siblings on the east coast had come together to let their mother know it was time to move from her assisted living facility to a nursing home where she could get more care. Their plans got interrupted, as the best laid plans so often do, by this trip to the emergency room.

What struck me about this family, whom I have known for years, was that their weariness and distress were amplified by their frustration, expressed to each other about the ones who were currently in the treatment area at any given time with their mother. They would take turns, two at a time going back while the rest sat in the lobby and discussed their anxiety and their expectations about what the others, the ones not present, should be doing, and were failing to do. We all probably know these complex and deeply rooted family dynamics and dysfunctions, and as I observed, I wondered what might be different if these siblings could all sit together, look at each other, and name old, long-held grievances that have never been spoken and may not even be recognized. Such things as

"I'm always the one who gets called when something goes wrong."

"I do everything and you don't do enough."

"You're not even in Virginia and you still want to tell us how we should be handling this."

"You think you're the only one who ever does anything and you don't even see what the rest of us are doing."

If only all these complaints could be named—and I believe most families would need outside help to do that--if all these complaints could be named, they might very well lead to the deeper hurts that are at their root:

You are the favorite.

She values your help over mine.

I'm the outsider and you don't even realize that.

I'm the invisible child and your denial of that fact just emphasizes how little you understand it.

These common and so widely shared complaints and hurts are deeply embedded in the interconnectedness of any healthy family, and usually they stay unnamed, below the surface, until crisis hits. Then they rise up, become visible, and do their damage. Healthy families, and healthy communities, withstand the damage, recover from it, and heal, in the best circumstances. They also learn and change during the healing, and they're different after the recovery.

As I've said before, transformation is difficult. So why would we try to do this, why should we try to name what's real, when it is likely to be stressful and painful? We do it because on the other side of the difficulty and pain, healing is waiting for us. Now, in the best of all possible worlds, this is the point where I would tell you exactly how to name what's real, and my instructions would be clear and consistent and they would work all the time—or maybe ninety percent of the time. In this world, though, it is not that simple, and that's not surprising. Naming what's real takes persistence and courage and determination and the willingness to bear up under people's distress and anger, and in many cases it probably takes professional help. Don't be discouraged, though—that doesn't mean we can't try; it doesn't mean we can't make *some* progress on our own.

Not long ago, I read about this example of the need for naming. A manufacturing company kept getting poor ratings on customer service. Top executives decided they needed to create a comprehensive training program for all their customer service representatives to teach them how they should be dealing with customer calls and

complaints. After all, the customer service representatives were the ones customers talked to, so they must be the source of the problem. The executives called in a consulting company to help design the training program, and the consulting company began with an in depth investigation. They discovered that the problems customers were complaining about had to do with shipping, billing, quality control—problems that the customers experienced as poor customer service, but in fact had nothing to do with the customer service representatives. The consulting company came in with no preconceived notions, asked "what" questions and "why" questions, and were able to name the problem accurately. An extensive training program for the customer service representatives would not have solved the company's problem, because the skills of the customer service representatives were not what customers were complaining about. The problem was not on the surface, where it might be relatively easy to fix. The real problem was below the surface.

The consulting company had no preconceived notions, asked "what" questions followed by "why" questions—you can see why in a family situation this would be a challenging task without outside help. Preconceived notions are so deeply rooted that you often can't even tell that they're there. "What" questions might be fairly obvious, but "why" questions would be likely to unearth long-buried hurts. In a church context, though, this process might be a little more manageable. Over time, I've talked with a lot of ministers and a lot of congregations in search of a minister, and I work in a seminary, so I'm exposed to plenty of reading about the relationships between ministers and congregations. Since your ministry is lay-led, these reflections don't apply to you specifically, but they do reveal aspects of church life that may be directly related to the entire structure of a congregation.

Let's look at an example of a church issue that comes up often and gets discussed throughout all the mainline denominations. I want to use something that doesn't relate directly to you because I don't want to create the impression that I'm trying to give you a hint or make a subtle suggestion that you are doing something wrong. I'm using church growth as an example, since you all are in a really unique

position when it comes to growth, and standard wisdom does not necessarily apply in your case. So we can just look at the process of naming in this example, and not get off track focusing on growth.

Expectations about church growth are so common that there are cartoons about it: the one I saw recently showed two people talking in the pew; one said, "We need a minister that will grow our church," and the other said, "Yes, but we don't want one that will try to change anything!" We can name the realities beneath that very familiar scenario:

This cartoon congregation wants to grow. *Wants* to grow, or thinks they *should* grow? There's the first opportunity for a "why" question and the first opportunity for naming. Why do you want to grow? The standard answer that I've heard when I've been involved in these conversations is, "So that we can spread the word about Unitarian Universalism to more people." Really? But we don't do that; in fact, we often shy away from that because it sounds too much like evangelism to us. People don't learn about Unitarian Universalism because we go out into the world and proclaim it; the number one way people find out about us is from the internet. So spreading the word isn't the real reason we want to grow. If we keep working, keep asking, we may free ourselves to name those real reasons: a couple of common ones are that we want more money, and we want more people to do the work. That's not what we say when we begin the growth conversations, but that's often what's real. When we continue with the "why" questions, we may arrive at more precise naming: why do we want more money? Why do we want more people to do the work? Why not just talk about the best ways to use the money we already have, and eliminate some of the work? But we want more money because, let's say, we want to expand our facilities. Why do we want to expand our facilities when we're already dissatisfied with how much work there is? In this example, a good outcome might be that the congregation would finally be able to say, "We don't want to grow. We want more money and we want less work but we want to stay just the way we are." From that starting point, the congregation can begin to name the positives and negatives of staying the way they are, the positives and negatives of changing, the risks and potential rewards of changing, and in an ideal situation they may finally be able to

say, "We are going to change. We are going to risk A so that we might possible achieve B. It's a risk we're willing to take." On the other hand, they may say, "We don't want to risk changing; we don't want to take the chance that we may have to give up A; we don't want B that much." That's a valid decision to make, and a congregation that can name that they don't want to change may eventually go back and revisit that decision a few years down the road. In that case, they will be dealing honestly with each other in the meantime, and they will be speaking the truth in the best way they know how. There is tremendous value in speaking that truth.

Of course, there is also risk in speaking that truth. Challenges in relationships and congregations go unnamed for a reason; they can be very difficult to deal with once the light has shined on them and they've been made speakable. I'm not talking about you now, but naming what's real can lead to such discoveries as these:
We let *blank* influence our decision making too much because s/he is bossy or a difficult person or a large donor that we don't want to annoy.
We create lots of processes based on how we do things in our jobs, and not based on our identity as a religious community. This translates into we are more comfortable in our professional identities than in our religious identities. This translates into we are more comfortable as a social club with people who share our way of thinking than we are as a religious community.

No congregation is free of these kinds of characteristics; we are not perfect, and we are not better than any other denominations because we are UUs. Knowing these realities, and knowing how they affect us as a community, liberate us so that we can see our true challenges and look to our principles for guidance about how to work with them, so that they don't dominate our lives together in community. The good news is that one of the biggest stumbling blocks to doing this work of naming is recognizing that it needs to be done. Once that perspective, that recognition, is part of our way of addressing our congregational needs, we're already on the way to naming what's real. When we let our principles guide us—when we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person (including those who disagree with us), when we support each other's

searches for truth and meaning, when we expect our interactions to be guided by justice, equity, and compassion---then the difficulties and potential hurts that come with naming what's real can be dealt with effectively. Some people probably wish I would say there will be no difficulties and hurts when we're guided by our principles, but that would not be naming what's real. Naming names---calling things by their true names and seeing them for what they are—can be hurtful and messy, and yet that is exactly what sets us on the path to freeing ourselves to do the real work, in church and in our own lives.

And so may it be.