

The Hard Work of Welcoming

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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My Turn:

Neal Eisenstein

You are the community that my wife and I chose, many years ago, to seek comfort, support, inclusiveness and religious meaning. You are the community we chose to help us raise our children. And you are the community that welcomes Sara and me as we're able to give back and invest our energies and, in the process, add meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

Up until last year, I never actually questioned these beliefs. But now, something has changed. Not in the substance of what and who we are, but in the symbolism of what we stand for and how it relates to who I am and what I believe to be right.

The change started during a congregational vote to accept the passage of a resolution declaring this church to be a welcoming institution with regard to homosexuals and lesbians. It all changed for me that day, during that vote.

At the time, I admit, I wasn't really paying attention to the process. To tell you the truth, during the debate, I recall that my mind wandered a bit and I thought to myself, "What's the point, don't we already welcome people of all persuasions to this community? What's the point?"

Well, as I recall, there was some dissension and disagreement as to the need for this vote, but, as things went, it passed and I never gave it much thought. But something changed for me that day. Something began churning inside me about this "welcoming and inclusive congregation" concept.

As I began to clarify my feelings, it struck me that passing this resolution suggested a huge leap for the congregation but, somehow, to me, it seemed ... *flawed*. Flawed in the sense that as a Jew, who grew up going to synagogue and now attends a church, the Unitarian Church in Summit ... I don't feel welcomed by how we describe ourselves. In fact, I feel excluded. Have I made the compromise to be here anyway, despite the fact that we call this place a church, over these many years? Yes, of course. But now, today, I want to let you know that I feel excluded by the fact that we call this place a church. And I'm feeling like it's not okay with me anymore.

If we're truly serious about the vision of a welcoming and inclusive congregation, and felt it important to pass a resolution proclaiming this, then I don't understand the logic of

calling this place a church. You see, for many of us who still embrace our Jewishness, acknowledging that we go to "church" is a big deal. Remember that I was a bar mitzvah boy. For some of us, it's really hard. I can't tell my mother that I went to "church" today. I have to say "services." I can't tell my Jewish friends about "church." I have to position my faith in terms of "the congregation." For me, it's hard. And when the vote was over last year and the resolution was passed to proclaim this congregation "welcoming and inclusive," it was 10 times harder to accept that the word chosen, many, many years ago, to name this house of worship doesn't fit for me. In fact, on some level, I feel *excluded* by the nature of what we call this place.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of leading a discussion among interfaith couples coming from both Jewish and Catholic backgrounds. There were about 35 to 40 folks altogether. And I have to share with you that people were *chomping at the bit* to express their upset and frustration about the fact that we call this place a church.

Well, this is my home and I'm not leaving. And you are part of my family and that's the way it is. But this place feels much more like a *fellowship* to me, not a church. This is the way I hold it. I wonder ... if there's room for a dialogue about this. Are we truly a *welcoming and inclusive* congregation? I trust that we are becoming one. I hope that we're strong enough and secure enough to rethink what's most important to us ... as one congregation, united in the respect for diversity and inclusiveness.

Thank you.

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Meditation on Welcoming

by Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern

Welcome to the stranger.
Oh my goodness, what is she wearing?

Welcome to the foreigner.
Did you understand what he just said?!

Welcome to the poor.
But why must they seem so desperate?

Welcome to the disenfranchised.
They really must get over their anger.

Welcome to the gay men.
I just wish they wouldn't hold hands in front of me.

And to the Christians
Though it's tiring to hear about "God, God, God."

To the humanists.
Must they take themselves so seriously?

And to those committed to social change
Who can't seem to leave well enough alone.

Of course, you're all welcome here.
Welcome to *my* house of worship.
Anyone like me is welcome here.
We need not think alike to love alike.
*You're not **Republican**, are you? Seriously?*
(How can he believe that stuff?)

But yes, welcome. Come to our music night,
But leave those five young kids behind, if you can.
I like it quiet.

Welcome home.
Just keep your shoes on
And don't ask me to move the furniture.
I like our house just the way it is.
It's been this way for a while,
and if you hang around long enough you'll understand why.

Welcome. Come again sometime soon.
You're always welcome here!

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Sermon

My first year at Stanford, a debate was raging on campus. It was an issue that ended up getting focused around the required freshman class called "Western Culture," though the scope of the debate was much larger. That freshman class had for years been framed as the course that ensured that all freshmen were exposed to the basics of what might be called the "canon" of Western thought. That canon was decided by the faculty at Stanford, but it reflected the broader and long-standing favorites of most academic institutions in Europe and the United States. There was Plato and Aristotle to start, John Stuart Mill, Locke, Hobbes, maybe some Freud, Jung, Nietzsche, the Bible. You get the picture. You probably have some of the books on your shelves from when you were also required to do your time with the great minds that shaped Western politics, social theory and religion.

The debate that was raging when I arrived on campus was whether that canon should be revisited. Where were the women in this list, the people of color, the great thinkers who

shaped the world beyond Europe or indirectly even shaped thought in Europe or the United States? Who decided the canon, and wasn't it time to shake it up a bit?

It was big stuff. There were demonstrations on campus advocating for a broader, more representative reading list. William Bennett, then the U.S. secretary of education, came to speak against the initiative. The nation watched (or so we felt) to see which way Stanford fell. Would Stanford lead the way in the slow demise of Western standards of education, or hold its ground against the winds of change? Would Stanford lead the way into a new vision of education, or take the safe way out, protecting a dusty and fossilized body of thought that grew more and more irrelevant to the students it sought to educate for leadership in this changed world?

The university did ultimately decide to change the program, calling the required class "Culture, Ideas and Values," and giving the track leaders the freedom to pull from a broader list, and when it did, Stanford was accused of giving up on academic standards, diluting the quality of its education to cater to minority interests. My sense of what happened, however, is that the university exercised some visionary leadership. It brought a new paradigm of social theory to bear on the philosophy of education. Stanford was at the leading edge of a trend in education that moved from the melting pot theory to multiculturalism.

What does that mean?

Well, I'm sure we all remember what the melting pot theory is from our high school civics or history class. This was how America was described: Bring people from all over the world and don't worry about the differences. Here in this great nation, all will melt together into one uniform and harmonious substance that is America (or American). What it came to mean in practice is that folks who came to this nation had to give up their distinctiveness, to shed their accents and national garb, to take on values that conformed to the status quo. Those who stood outside the mainstream, who kept a distinctiveness, were always -- and, I would argue, still are -- a bit suspect.

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, was a movement that, at its onset, said that all cultures had value equal to each other, worthy of being taught or being exposed to. It argued a cultural relativism. Today this has given way in many circles to a variation called the salad bowl theory. You can almost imagine what this theory says just from its name: It argues that each culture, when it maintains its separate identity, brings something to the larger venture that enhances the whole -- that the pieces play off each other in ways that make the whole better than the sum of its parts.

The reason that I bring all this up is that I think it has something to say to us as a microcosm of our world. It speaks to us as a community that seeks to be more just, equitable, compassionate, and in particular *welcoming*. Two years ago, this community voted to be welcoming to folks who were gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. In order to do that, we spent a year looking at our biases, prejudices, experiences, and we had speakers and videos about challenges and experiences that people who are gay or lesbian

or transgender have. We did that so that we could truly say we were as welcoming as possible. We voluntarily entered into their world so we could build bridges from a heterosexual world to a homosexual or bisexual world. You might say we agreed to broaden our canon of relevant experience. And from all accounts, the work wasn't always easy. For some, it brought up parts of themselves that were intolerant, uncertainties, discomfort. For others, it required real personal change. And for a few, best intentions employed, the finding was that there were moccasins they could not walk in, and bridges they could not build or cross.

In that sense, it was a perfect experience of what it really can mean to be a welcoming congregation. When we say we're welcoming, it sounds much nicer, more sugarcoated and easier than it is. What it can really mean to open our hearts and homes to any who come through its portals, can mean some personal and collective work that is hardly sweet or easy going down. Indeed, it can be some of the hardest work we do.

Take, for instance, a colleague's congregation located in a city with a deaf university. A couple of students sympathetic to the liberal religious values of Unitarian Universalism came, inspired by a professor who is UU. These students are deaf. They read lips, but that's easier for casual exchange about the cost of a newspaper than a full-length sermon full of literary and historical references. If these students were going to stay and invite friends, the congregation would have to get interpreters for the service. So the congregation set to looking into it.

What they found out when they looked into it is that for the signers to do a good job, they'd need the sermon text a day or two in advance. That meant the preacher, who generally wrote the day or night before, would have to change her long-ingrained patterns of the creative process. Moreover, an hour-long service is a long time for a single signer to be on duty. Generally, signers switch off every 20 minutes or so. That meant they'd need at least two signers every Sunday. That costs money. Eight thousand dollars a year, to be exact, and a volunteer to coordinate the signers and get the service to them each week.

And that wasn't all the congregation needed to do to be welcoming. If the students and their friends were going to participate in the life of the congregation, people were going to need some sensitivity training. For instance, if the students were to come to a group or a committee meeting, people would have to know to speak slowly and face the deaf member of the group -- even if the speaker was addressing or responding to another person in the group who was not the deaf person. It was quite an adjustment of basic social behavior. Moreover, people needed to raise their hands to let the deaf person know whom to look at. And if they really wanted to make the deaf members feel welcome, folks realized it would be nice to learn some sign language themselves, so a few members arranged to teach and others to take a sign language course at church.

You get the idea about the kind of adjustments and learning folks had to undertake. And all this change and discomfort and hassle and cost just to welcome a few more members!

Now, this congregation could have ignored the challenge. They could have said: Wasn't there some deaf church these kids could go to? Or they could have been friendly but passive and ignored the students' needs until the latter finally went away. Or they could have asked why the students didn't bring their own interpreter. Anything to avoid the hassle. But they didn't. Instead, they argued for an hour at the most recent annual meeting over whether they could raise the extra \$8,000 to hire the signers, even though it was a very tough year for fund-raising, and they didn't really have the money in hand. They decided that they had no choice. They had to welcome these people.

One common complaint about our congregations is that we are pretty lily-white as a religious movement. I share the concern and I know many of you do. Sure, white people can be wonderful, and sure we can be pretty varied among ourselves, but there is something about a congregation that is rich with different kinds of people and life experiences that most of us find energizing.

There's an intellectual argument for why it's good for us. You know, the old blind men holding the elephant, each with a grip on a different part, reminding us that the only way we are likely to figure out exactly what this big thing we are holding is all about is to bring as many of our perspectives as possible together. However, I don't think the intellectual argument is why we are excited about being more diverse as a congregation. I think most of us know from experience that life is more interesting when people bring very different experiences and perspectives to the table, and the more radically different, the more interesting. Maybe growing up in or around New York City, you also begin to think that this kind of diversity is a norm and miss it when it isn't there.

However, if there is a reason that our denomination remains pretty homogenous, at least part of it, I think, is that sometimes, whether we are aware of it or not, what we mean by "becoming more diverse" is attracting more people who look different from us, with different life experiences, but who are -- when push comes to shove -- willing to conform to who and what *we already are*. Using the Stanford analogy, we get excited about recruiting professors of different ethnic backgrounds, and students of different nationalities, Native Americans and foreign-educated graduate students -- but we don't want them to challenge what or how we do things in the university. Why did you come to Stanford if you didn't like what we did here? Aren't there places that would be more of what you're looking for? It would have been fairer if for decades the university had printed on the bottom of its acceptance letters or had recruiters say out loud: Come, bring your rich, diverse experience, but don't think you will change us. It is only *we* who are allowed to change *you*.

Compare that reaction to the reaction of the church that responded to the deaf visitors, who finally found a religious community whose beliefs fit their own. Or to this community's work toward becoming more welcoming of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Both modeled the belief that the real work of welcoming diversity is about entering enough into the other's world that *they change you as much as you change them*.

Of course, it is understandable that we might resist and even dread some of the work of welcoming. Real welcoming, as this congregation knows, takes us to new and unfamiliar places. If, for instance, we were to try to make ourselves more welcoming to African-Americans, that would probably mean exploring the racism that plagues their every day. And if thinkers like Cornell West are right, facing racism would require looking deep into the abyss of hopelessness that faces black America. Moreover, at the bottom of that abyss, we are likely to find our own responsibility to right some pretty systemic wrongs.

So being welcoming can sound sugary sweet, but in reality can make us confront issues about ourselves and the world we might rather not. Moreover, it almost always requires that we change a bit of ourselves, and that can be hard.

It is understandable not to want to change. It is understandable that sometimes we just want a place to come to that is easy, familiar and unchanging in a world where the rate of change makes the ground beneath our feet seem to tremble. However, when our desire for comfort and constancy gets in the way of others feeling welcome, we need to be honest with ourselves about what it is we are doing. It begins to me to look an awful lot like sin - sin, that which gets in the way of a fully loving relationship between ourselves and others.

Theodore Parker in his famous 1841 sermon, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," talks about the danger of mistaking the trappings of religion for what is at its core. The permanent, meaning the values at our core, we must protect, but the way in which they are celebrated in worship or honored in our community, these are the transient, changing with the times. A religion that endures with strength and relevance is one that knows the difference. And so we must ask ourselves each time: Is what we are being asked to change at our core or just some sacred cow whose time it is to be put out to pasture? Our work to welcome diversity requires that we ask this question again and again.

May we continue to do so, loving our neighbor, keeping our faith alive.

Amen.