



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Sunday, February 9, 2025

“Being the People We Mean to Be”

with Rev. Sara Lewis

*“Believing in” inclusion, equity, and justice is a good start, but how do we move beyond being a believer to an active builder of a more inclusive, equitable, and just world?
How do we actually become the people we intend ourselves to be?*

Chalice Lighting

Who We Are Called to Be

By Pat Uribe-Lichty

Our chalice is a reminder
that in hard times,
our ancestors in faith
acted with courage
to bring hope and safety,
to bring life itself
to threatened people.
We light it today

as a reminder of who
we are called to be
in a world still dangerous
and despairing.
With courage,
and faith,
We bring ourselves
to the work before us.

Opening Words

Justice Is Our Prayer

by Rebekah Savage

We gather together today with sacred intention to declare that Justice is our prayer.
We affirm in covenant with the Beloved Community that is possible.

Not here, not quite yet.

The seeds have been planted time and again,
and we remember all those who went before us who made Beloved Community a
dream that could be realized.

Justice is our prayer.

May our time of worship/service together continue to water the budding trees of our
diverse interdependence.

May our time of worship give air and nourishment to the parts of our collective spirits
that need to grow and thrive;
that embrace equity as a known way of being.

Justice is our prayer.

We affirm in covenant with the Beloved Community that is possible.

May it be so.

Let us worship together.

Story For All

Spite Fences

by Paul Beckel

Not too long ago, four neighbors were living together in peace and harmony. They liked to get together and play and to sing and to have barbecues. They grilled out so often, in fact, that one of the neighbors planted a grill permanently in her backyard. These friends always liked to eat hamburgers at their barbecues. Some would have cheese on their burgers. Others preferred just lettuce. A few loved to pour on globs of steak sauce. They liked the fact that everyone was free to eat their hamburgers any way they wanted.

One day the neighbor with the grill got a job in another city and had to move away. As the remaining friends waved goodbye, they shed a few tears because they were sure that no one would ever be able to take the place of that friend who'd built the neighborhood grill.

A few days later a new neighbor moved in. The others watched carefully as the new neighbor moved in her things. They were delighted when she set up a grill that evening and began to heat up some coals. She was going to fit right in. But wait a minute Where was the hamburger!???? The stranger placed something soft and flabby onto the grill, and as it cooked it gave off an odor that was too unfamiliar to be pleasant. "Pew!" said the other neighbors. Everyone ran into their houses and locked the doors.

The new neighbor soon came around knocking on doors to invite everyone to dinner. But the others pretended they weren't home. They called each other on the phone and said, "We've got to get rid of this new neighbor or at least make sure her awful cooking smells don't pollute OUR backyards."

They decided they would build fences around their backyards, fences so tall that no awful smells would ever reach over them, fences so high that sunbeams wouldn't shine into her windows or nourish her grass. Maybe – if they were lucky – the new neighbor would move away when her house got dark and her grass turned brown. Perhaps then the right kind of person would move in.

And so these neighbors put up their fences – fences that prevented even the tiniest beam of light from squeezing through. Then the neighbors waited to see what would happen. Unfortunately, they could no longer attend the barbecues they had so enjoyed, but at least they didn't have to put up with that strange smell anymore.

They'd been in such a hurry to put up the fences, however, that they soon had a number of problems. First of all, the fences were about as attractive as a clump of weeds, and other neighbors on the block complained. Second, the fences were so humongous that they were hard to paint and so heavy that they started to sag after awhile.

One day the fences just collapsed with a BOOM. The neighbors cautiously came out of their houses to see what had happened. The new neighbor was nowhere in sight. "Oh no!" they gasped. "What if she's hurt?"

Well, she wasn't hurt. *She was gone.* Now they hadn't seen her since the day she moved in, so for all they knew she might have moved out weeks ago! The neighbors realized they had gotten what they wanted, but they weren't happy about it. In fact, they were thinking they had made a big mistake.

That's all of this story that I know. We can all imagine how we would want this story to end.

Reading 1

From The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias

by Dolly Chugh

We each have identities we claim. We look to others to grant these identities. When we don't get that affirmation, we feel threatened, which is stressful, and we do things we would not normally do. Under self-threat, we become less of the good people we mean to be.

Research reveals how our need for affirmation overrides our genuine desire to be a good colleague, friend, and ally. One study found that we value boosts to our self-esteem, such as compliments, more than our favorite sex acts and foods. Given that it is socially taboo to openly covet compliments, these study participants probably underreported how much they value that affirmation.

We all fall into this pattern. We fish for affirmation. We center our needs, nudging away the needs of others. We seek what activists call “cookies”, acknowledgments of our good intentions, even when the impact is costly to the cookie giver. We especially crave that affirmation when faced with a situation that challenges the believer identity we are claiming. The affirmation relieves the self-threat, but ironically, we end up acting less like – not more like – the people we mean to be.

Part 1: The People We Mean to Be

We all have identities that we claim, and for most of us here today those identities likely include being a Unitarian Universalist and being a “good person”. These identities will include values. For Unitarian Universalists, we claim these as our shared values: Love, Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity. The identity of “good person” has a bit more nebulous values attached to it, but one that I would bet we could agree on is welcome and inclusion. For most of the people I know, a good person doesn't leave others out, doesn't exclude others, doesn't discriminate.

Now, not everyone in the world believes in these values, and some may still define themselves as good people, moral people, religious people while believing that some people are better than other people or that some people should be excluded or bullied because of their differences. That's a subject for a different day, however, as right now I

want to examine the gap between believing in inclusion and practicing it. So we start with the assumption that we believe in inclusion.

Great – if we believe in inclusion then everyone should be welcomed and feel included, right? Except it turns out that believing in something isn't enough to make it so, and claiming the identity of a good person isn't enough to actually be the person we mean to be. Beliefs and ideas aren't enough.

One reason for the tragic gap between intentions and actual actions is that we all hold implicit, sometimes called unconscious, biases. These are biases that we absorb at very young ages from the environment around us, and there is almost no way for anyone to become an adult without holding some kind of bias. Our biases are more likely to influence our actions when we are under stress and are acting faster and at a more instinctual level, so anytime we are rushed, anxious, surprised, or feel threatened – including a perceived threat to our own self-image as a good person – our biases are more likely to drive the bus of our actions while our conscious beliefs and values become mere passengers.

Many times these biases only result in small actions. Maybe you are just a bit awkward or tense talking to someone, or maybe you just sometimes avoid a person. Maybe you are only slightly more likely to help a certain kind of person than you are to help another type of person. But all of these small actions still add up. Sociologist Robert Merton calls this the Matthew Effect, for the rich get richer and the poor get poorer story from the Bible. These slivers of bias add up and can result in huge advantage gaps. And when we as a community are trying to practice inclusion, the little subtle slivers of bias that each of us hold can add up to create some not-so-subtle barriers to true inclusion and belonging for all.

There are other basic features of our humanness, such as our need for affirmation or “cookies” as activists call it, that work with bias to steer our behavior in less helpful directions. All of this works together in complex ways, even if we have good intentions. In fact, there are four types of good intentions we should especially watch out for:

1. Savior Mode

Doing good for others can make us feel good and feel good about ourselves. There can be a warm glow of happiness that comes from doing a good thing. And while helping shouldn't be miserable, the danger is that we can get hooked on the happy warm feelings of do-gooding and make the whole thing about us and meeting our own need for that feeling, rather than being centered on the actual needs and empowerment of other people.

2. Sympathy Mode

Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone, while not feeling directly connected to what is going on with them. We feel bad for someone, without feeling solidarity that we could also be in that same situation. Well-intended sympathy can lead to charity and care, but almost always results in power hierarchy between the givers and those who are served. This hierarchy can lead to disempowering and lowering the esteem and status of those who receive the charity and care, and it can also over-value the feelings of the ones giving sympathy. All of this creates distance and othering rather than inclusion.

3. Tolerance and Color-Blind Mode

Tolerating something is not the same as accepting or celebrating it. We tolerate someone snoring by putting in ear plugs. A common form of tolerance of difference is to be “difference-blind” or to claim to not see or notice the differences between people. We say we see everyone as the same, but for those who are actually different this feels like not really being seen at all.

4. Typecasting Mode

Typecasting is a kind of stereotyping, or expecting all individual members of a group to behave or be a certain way. Sometimes our type casting can be positive, such as “all women are so nurturing and naturally kind”, but even these supposedly positive stereotypes limit the possibilities for authentic real human possibility and limit our ability to truly know one another and include each other in all our complex quirky uniqueness.

These subtle ways of othering people, even with seemingly good intentions, contribute to excluding rather than including people. They send some really hurtful messages, as outlined in the book Subtle Acts of Exclusion: How to Understand, Identify, and Stop Microaggressions by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran. These authors call them Subtle Acts of Exclusion and group them all into the messages they send. These messages are:

You are Invisible

You, or people like you, are inadequate

You are not an individual

You don't belong

You are not normal

You are a curiosity

You are a threat

You are a burden

Pause for a moment and feel those messages in your heart. Perhaps some of you receive one of these messages all the time wherever you go. Perhaps some of you get these messages sometimes in some contexts and not in others. And perhaps some of you never receive these sort of messages. We all hold different identities and perspectives. But I believe that we are all people who believe these messages are harmful to belonging and community, inclusion and justice.

Reading 2

“It's Hard Work”

by Rosemary Bray McNatt, from Been in the Storm so Long: A Meditation Manual

Why are we still talking about inclusivity and diversity when we have done so little to make them real? Why are we still looking pained about the lack of diversity in the denomination? Because diversity, inclusivity, is terribly hard, terribly uncomfortable, definitely unsettling, and often quite frustrating.

What I know about being inclusive—crossing from culture to culture, learning the language of diversity—is that it's the work of a lifetime. It's hard to accept people who are not like you, who don't talk the way you do, or believe the things you believe, or dress or vote as you do. It's even harder to appreciate them for the things about them that are not like you, to find them interesting and fun, to enjoy the learning that's part of the experience, and to acknowledge, finally, that you may have to agree to disagree.

The truth is this: If there is no justice, there will be no peace. We can read Thoreau and Emerson to one another, quote Rilke and Alice Walker and Howard Thurman, and think good and noble thoughts about ourselves. But if we cannot bring justice into the small circle of our own individual lives, we cannot hope to bring justice to the world. And if we do not bring justice to the world, none of us is safe and none of us will survive. Nothing that Unitarian Universalists need to do is more important than making justice real—here, where we are. Hard as diversity is, it is our most important task.

Part 2: Practice Becoming the People We Mean To Be

So how do we move from being a people who believe in but do not practice the value of inclusion to a people OF inclusion and justice? How do we do the work that Rosemary Bray McNatt identified as our most important task in our second reading? The first step is to switch from a fixed mindset, the idea that we already are fully formed people who cannot change to a growth mindset, or perceiving ourselves as always growing, learning, and capable of change. Here is how Dolly Chugh describes the effects of this mindset in The Person You Mean to Be:

When you activate a growth mindset voice, you are more likely to respond, “I don’t really understand what I did wrong, but I would like to understand”, or to take the time to figure it out on your own. You are more likely to apologize by saying “I am sorry, I was wrong” than by saying “I am sorry you were offended”, which points the finger at the other person for taking offense rather than at ourselves for delivering the offense. In a growth mindset, you are more likely to accept that your apology may not erase the damage done, and to refrain from reburdening the other person by asking them to make you feel better or put their anger aside. If these are new ways of responding, you may feel uncomfortable. Keep trying. Like all habits, these get easier with practice.

And then we can use that growth mindset to intentionally seek out learning, particularly learning more about people and cultures not like us. Critically, for this to be part of a practice of inclusion we have to approach our learning with an open mind and heart for ourselves to be changed and moved, rather than with a tourist mindset that exoticizes others. There are so many opportunities to learn about people different from ourselves, from documentaries to novels to cultural festivals to podcasts, but I’m going to plug one in particular: this year’s UU Common Read, a book chosen by the Unitarian Universalist Association to be the common read for all UU’s that year, is called Authentic Selves: Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families. We have this book available for sale in the Commons right now, and I’m teaching a class on this book this month. Check it out and consider joining me in this learning.

UU Common Read on OUUC’s Adult Faith Development webpage:
<https://www.ouuc.org/learn/adult-faith-development/#common-read>

And learning about people from a distance is only one small step. We can also invest in authentic relationships and come to know people different than ourselves in all their authentic unique complexity. We can move past small talk and invite deeper sharing. Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran in Subtle Acts of Exclusion suggest this:

You can meet with people and ask questions like “what’s something about you that you would like me to know?” or “What should I know about you in order for us to work better together?” or “How can I best support you this week?”. Notice that these kinds of questions are not invasive because they are opening up a space for people to tell you what they want. It’s not the same as asking “I’d love to know more about you. So, tell me about your religion and your sexuality and your education and ...” Don’t do that.

In the context of this congregation, we can enter into more authentic relationships with each other and with newcomers by asking open ended curious questions like “what are you seeking in a faith community?” “Is there anything about the congregation or today’s service you are curious about?” or “Is there something on your heart today that you would like to share?”

But entering into authentic relationship does come with some difficulties, which may call on us to build up our skills and capacity around two difficult emotions: pain and anger. We may not enjoy these when we encounter them in others, but we can build our capacity for holding space for them.

So an important practice of inclusion is to sit with pain. When others share their pain with us, we may feel helpless, inadequate, unsure what to do. All of those emotions are a kind of self-threat and a natural urge may be to turn away or avoid the pain. But a more connecting and inclusive way to sit with another’s pain is to acknowledge it, even when you don’t know what to say. Be real, authentic, and there for them – a simple way would be to just say “I don’t know what to say but I’m here and I’m listening”.

Second, don’t make it be about you. Don’t shift to talking about how sad it makes you, or to focus on your own tears, or how much you are angry about it. And don’t seek affirmation that you are being a good ally or a good friend. This isn’t about you. Let it be about the other person and just listen and hold space for their pain.

And finally, if you have real help or support to offer do that. Be specific: I know someone you could talk to and I can connect you Or I can do some research and look for resources for you. Specific and doable offers are much better than “is there anything I can do to help?”

The other difficult emotion we may encounter is anger. Our discomfort with anger divides us from others who are working for justice and can lead to us saying “they are too angry, too radical, too disruptive”. We idolize peaceful and disciplined protest, civil discourse, polite requests for change, and see angry and loud and disruptive protest as counterproductive. But anger is a natural emotion for humans encountering injustice, and change is pushed forward by people expressing their righteous anger. Those that

we see as heroes now, like Martin Luther King Jr or Muhammad Ali, were seen as too angry and disruptive in their own time.

So a practice of inclusion for us is to learn to respect the heat that is brought by others who express their anger. We don't have to become angry ourselves, but we can respect those who are and not tone police them.

Another practice that may stretch our capacity for difficult conversations is that we can speak up when we hear or see others engage in acts of exclusion. This can be difficult, and many of us are conflict avoidant. But silence is complicity, and allyship is not an act we perform in the privacy of our own heads. So when you encounter something that you think is exclusionary you can say things like: "I feel like that could feel bad to some people" Or "that might create a barrier to including everyone" or "Reminder: that person uses they/them pronouns". Or admit you don't know everything and say "that made me uncomfortable, I'm working on being more inclusive and that feels off. Can we talk about it?" Or even just say "I don't agree." There are a thousand ways to respond, the important thing is that you do.

And just like there are microsignals and subtle acts of exclusion, there are also subtle acts of inclusion that we can practice. We can add our own pronouns to our name tags or introduce ourselves with our pronouns, even if we are a person whose gender presentation leads to most people already assuming they know our correct pronouns. We can wear a rainbow or black lives matter button. We can intentionally always leave an open space in our circle of conversation during coffee hour so there is room for another. Or when we notice in a meeting or conversation that someone hasn't expressed an opinion yet we can pause and ask them if they want to add anything. We can make sure that our intended welcome and inclusion is visible and obvious. I learned a lesson about this just last week: we have a high chair for children who come to the Thursday dinners, but I've been leaving it in the closet unless I see a child arrive and then asking the parent if they would like it. This week a volunteer said "I'm putting the high chair out front where people can see it when they come in". What a brilliant act of welcome and inclusion. Signal your welcome in obvious ways.

This practice of being the people we mean to be, of practicing acts of inclusion, may feel too small when the world seems to be on fire and we are faced with big and real threats and urgent calls for action. But we cannot heal the larger world by hurting ourselves or our own small piece of the world. The world we want to see, one of inclusion and justice, still starts right here in our own small circle of influence. Practice being the person you mean to be, practice building the community based on shared values, practice acting in the larger world based on those values. Our circle of influence will touch another's circle, and change can ripple and multiply.

It isn't quick. It isn't simple. But it can be, it can be all we believe in. We just have to practice.

Closing Words

by Emily Richards

Our work here [this morning] is at an end

And our work has just begun:

The work of holding one another and this community in love.

The work of trusting that we are on the right path.

The work of believing that what connects us is stronger than what separates us.

The work of engaging in that which makes us whole.

The work of deeper understanding and commitment.

The work of letting go of that which does not serve us.

The work of radical inclusion.

The work of collective liberation.

The work of this beloved community.

A beloved community of which we are all part.

A place where we are welcomed, respected, valued, cherished.

A place where we belong.

Go in peace. Amen. And blessed be.

Reflection questions:

- What are the challenges you face in truly practicing inclusion?
- How could you move from believing in inclusion to truly building a practice of inclusion? What are your action steps?