

## *Who is my Neighbor?*

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)

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### **WELCOME**

Let's take a moment to breathe now. And say thank you. It is good to be together.

The songs we've just sung are incredibly idealistic [*Consider Yourself Part of the Family* and *Come and go with me to that Land...* containing "there'll be freedom" ... and "there'll be justice in that land..."]. This week the world is acknowledging that it's been one hundred years since the carnage of World War 1. And yet how similar today are the conditions that put the world at risk then. I'm not enough of a historian to say which of these conditions continue on a centuries-long thru-line, and which go away and come back in cycles. But I can say that our ideals, counterfactual as they often feel, are worth striving for. Our principle, unabashedly calling for world community continues to motivate me, even as my past experience, and my awareness of the law of entropy, counsel me that the virtues of hope, and patience, must always exist side by side.

The principles we espouse here at BUF are optimistic, and I follow them imperfectly. Sometimes I judge that my neighbors do as well, but I pray to the spirits of grace, mindfulness, and serenity; I pray for the strength to let these judgments pass.

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Over the last few weeks there's been a lot of rhetoric around the question, "Why vote? I mean, my candidate might not win, and even if he or she does win, we may understand our "shared values" in different ways. And even if our understandings of shared values *are identical*, down to our precise priorities and wordsmithing of policies ... still, no politician is going to *consistently* behave with good judgement and integrity in pursuing those policies. And even if they were to do all of that, they won't be able to get a critical mass of others to decisively change things."

The same line of reasoning applies to our support for religious, educational, environmental, and similar groups oriented both toward a lofty collective vision, and toward individual growth and learning.

The same line of reason applies when we look *inward* as well ... and wonder why should we eat our vegetables, or practice yoga. It's not just that we're going to die anyway. It's also that we're going to have to live in the meantime enduring the same struggles, or encountering new ones.

An overarching theme that we are addressing together at BUF this month, in both Sunday services and religious education is, "Caring Locally." Last week Rev. Tessie Mandeville made a great point that caring locally includes both sort-of locally (within however we define our own communities), and also super-locally (as in regard to our-selves, as appropriate expressions of self-care).

A couple of months ago I preached a sermon entitled, *Who are We?* inviting reflection about who we are as a congregation, and also who we are as individuals. Who are we with such *need* for care, and such *capacity* to care for one another?

Today let's consider: "Who is my neighbor?" So thinking locally, but not *quite* so locally as within our

own skin and within our own minds ... and not quite so locally as within our own congregation ... and yet not quite *so globally* as to make our moral inquiry meaninglessly abstract.

So two questions: 1) what might it mean to care, to answer the call of love, within this *intermediate* realm of our social geography?

And 2) for those who don't know about BUF — but aren't like off the charts never going to want anything to do with BUF — for those within that space, how might we ensure that this place is plausibly a place to seek and to offer care?

**READING** “The Good Samaritan, adapted”

The board president once asked of the oracle, “What must we do within our congregation to foster unity in our diversity ... and create a genuine sense of welcome to every person who comes to us in the spirit of goodwill?”

The oracle replied, “What does it say in your Unitarian Universalist principles?”

The president replied:

- affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person
- affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations
- affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The oracle said nothing, just looked at the president like, ‘ok?’

It seems like a pretty long list.

I guess. But notice the verbs: ‘affirm and promote.’ That’s *not* a terribly high bar.

Agreed. Especially, I suppose, if we’re just thinking about these *principles* in the *abstract*, like, applying to some vague humanity out there.

Right. Think about it this way, said the oracle, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...’

Wait a minute, is this a Christian thing?

Can I finish?

Of course, sorry, that was rude. And besides, I know, ideally we’re going to be open to both the people and the highest ideals of Christianities. Especially the part about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Exactly, and I imagine, at BUF, that you ask among yourselves from time to time, ‘Who is my neighbor?’

The board president smiled and nodded vigorously.

And I like it, said the oracle, how you referred a moment ago to *christianities* ... because *you* know that even at BUF there are those with *quite a range* of expressions, and practices, that can credibly be called “christianities.”

-- At least that's what I think. Some folks will differ, because they think there's only one way to be a Christian. And others will differ because it's easier to dismiss Christians by assuming that they all think the same way.

I think we're kind of getting off track.

OK, here's my point: I'm about to tell a story. I won't call it a “parable” if that's going to cause you to get all defensive. It's a story, alright? It's metaphorical. Not to be taken literally. (Though I'm starting to wonder if anyone understands any more what “literally” even means.)

The board president sighed, and nodded, knowingly.

Alright then: a man, or, sorry, it doesn't have to be a man ... a homeless person was going from, let's say Bellingham, out into the *county*.

Oh oh, this isn't going to turn out well.

You're right. The homeless person starts hitchhiking and a corrupt cop pulls up. The person starts running, so the cop turns off his body cam, and tazes the person in the back. Then he quickly jumps into his squad car to take off after a black guy with a broken taillight who just drove by at 56 miles per hour.

That's a bit much, don't you think?

The oracle ignores the board president and continues with the story:

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and you know what it's like for priests these days, they have to serve like 12 parishes at a time. So he passed by on the other side. Then your own minister was headed out to Mt. Baker to ski, saw this person, but said to himself, well I'm going in the wrong direction; the hospital's back the other way.

And then finally an old, white, gun-slinging, anti-choice, refinery executive came along. He was headed home to his wife and large family in Lynden. But then he saw the homeless person crumpled there, *and behold he was moved to pity. He went to him and bound up his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal....*

Wait, wait, there's something wrong with this picture.

Oh sorry, my bad – he went to the homeless person and asked, ‘should I call 911?’ Then he waited for the paramedics ... followed the ambulance back to the hospital, hung around for 3 hours because, well, you know what it's like to get into the ER these days. And then for the next couple of days he came back to the hospital to visit, until the homeless person went away -- against medical advice -- because, lacking health insurance, this person was terrified.

And then?

Well, nobody knows what happened after that.

Huh. So what does that have to do with my original question — about what happens *inside* my congregation?

I don't know, what do *you* think? The guy's probably still out there.

## **TREBLE VOICES ENSEMBLE**

*Credo*

## **MEDITATION / SILENCE (5:00)**

## **MESSAGE**

In 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr, published a collection of essays on racial justice entitled, “Why we can’t wait.” In 2016, I shared a sermon called, “Why we can’t wait ... and yet we do.”

I acknowledged the unfulfilled dreams and the continuing urgency for all of us, together, to take responsibility to confront and eliminate *structural* racial oppression in the world at large ... and, more plausibly: for each of us to do this, within our *personal* spheres of influence — in particular, within our own cherished progressive institutions.

And, still, we continue to wait, it seems, because culture changes slowly. And *institutions* change a *little* faster ... but slowly. And individuals, well, we change maybe a *little* faster than institutions ... but, still, slowly. (Sometimes to advantage if, instead of changing rapidly and temporarily, we change slowly, and it sticks.)

I know that it's a little too easy for me to counsel patience -- as someone who does not *directly* experience racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other insidious prejudice.

I do believe that racism, misogyny, homophobia, etc, harm me *indirectly* because they cause outrageous harm to society as a whole -- that interdependent web of which we are *all* a part. But they don't hurt every one of us equally.

In that earlier sermon I quoted Rev. Peter Morales, the first Hispanic President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, who said: “I worry that we will fall victim to the progressive habit of declaring victory too early.” [“...the progressive habit of declaring victory too early.”] Morales' statement, and my sermon came just before the 2016 election. Since that time, it seems, we've become more careful about declaring victory too early. We've become *less sure* about the imminent, and inevitable advancement of Liberty, Civility, and Equality.

Still, addressing issues only at the level of national and state government bears the same risk as declaring victory too early. When we do this, our concerns for Liberty, Civility, and Equality become less immediate — both in time and in location.

So what do Liberty, Civility, and Equality look like right here, right now? What does it mean to enact our UU principles beginning within our homes and our congregations? I'll ask that question again in a couple of minutes. But let's pretend for a second that *we know* what these principles would look like in practice, in the here and now.

Even if we *did know* what shape our visions of justice should take, we could easily declare victory too early.

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I don't even want to talk about how many conversations were involved in the decision to name those five entities in our new org chart councils, rather than circles or columns or clusters or one of at least 15 other names. I admit: I may have slowed down the process myself when, getting frustrated, I threw out the suggestion that we call them 'murders,' as in crows.

I sometimes wonder if the greatest barriers to inclusion in UU congregations are our deeply engrained practices based in dreamy, unrealistic interpretations of the democratic process. For generations we've tried to break through these barriers. We're not there, yet.

And in this way we remain exclusive, I believe, because we drive away people who can't wait. And still I believe that small groups of committed people do extraordinary good in the world, by acting locally. And I believe that as we ensure inclusion, civility, and equality within our own sphere of influence, we become champions of social justice.

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I don't imagine that BUF is the right place for everyone in Whatcom County. But if you imagine that there is even one person out there who could find a sense of *purpose* here ... or *renewal*, or just the right amount of comfort for their affliction, or just the right amount of affliction for their comfort ... then it seems to me that it would be a caring thing to let them know we exist, and/or to see what you can do to help BUF to be a place of welcome for them.

There are a variety of ways to *foster* inclusion. Stephen Colbert, for example, says: "I believe that everyone has the right to their own religion, be you Hindu, Jewish or Muslim. I believe there are infinite paths to accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior."

There are a variety of ways to foster inclusion. I attended a retreat a couple of weeks ago with a group of UU ministers from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and BC. The retreat was held at a Catholic retreat center, and we were not allowed to move anything in the sanctuary, which limited the funkiness that some UU worship leaders would have inevitably concocted. On the other hand, the kitchen staff accommodated special diets for 36 out of 51 of us.

I don't know how they did that. And I am glad that I'm not responsible for the BUF kitchen and meal planning. But I'm very very grateful to those who are. And to those of you who have been working for decades to ensure that all kinds of barriers to inclusion are challenged. Not always successfully, I know. As every single barrier we face seems to require a different angle of attack.

Over the decades we have and/or continue to face barriers large and small: sexist language in our hymnals, upsetting theological expressions, wheelchair accessibility, hearing assistance and sign language, hiring practices, language translation at events and in our printed materials, chemical sensitivity, safety policies to prevent sexual predation, racial and heteronormative assumptions, practices and unconscious assumptions that silently exclude those without financial means, support for rather than expulsion of disruptive people, use of traditional euro-christian terminology whether architecturally, liturgically, or in religious education, choir pieces, and the hymns. And if not traditional terminology then obscure or highfalutin terminology. Worship style, aesthetics, and cultural appropriation can be barriers to

inclusion. Those who can't drive at night or attend meetings during the day, or find or afford childcare ... are limited in their options for participation.

We have engaged in conversations about gender-neutral restrooms, pro and con being expressed as matters of inclusion. We provide large print orders of service but not braille. In my previous congregation after a blind visitor came three times, we did acquire a \$300 braille hymnal that came in two bankers boxes. Despite repeated efforts to contact him, he never came back. And in the thirteen years I was there I don't know that we ever had anyone else who could have benefited from that purchase. I still don't think it was a mistake.

What fascinates me about these challenges around inclusion is that every single one has to be approached with a different combination of strategies. Some involve technical fixes, financial, logistical, interpersonal, or through improvements to our organizational or democratic process.

Some barriers we must address again and again by increasing awareness, communicating clearly, improving our skills and/or tolerance. Sometimes, in our efforts at inclusion we make choices, hoping to do the least harm.

I honor you for coming back, breathing deeply, laughing to overcome heartbreak, holding each other up, and overcoming doubt about whether these efforts are worth it. I am here because I believe they are worth it. You've modeled this for me again and again.

I imagine there are people who don't believe they can be safe here, literally, because we affirm and promote causes that seem to provoke harsh responses. And thus we could be a target for violence. That, of course, is the nature of hate crime, also known as terrorism, in which threat or violence in one place one can create fear and disruption everywhere. Of course people are getting gunned down today in theologically conservative churches, country music festivals, rich and poor schools. A few years ago (it's hard to remember them all) an Army psychiatrist murdered thirteen fellow soldiers on his own military base in Texas.

So I want to thank all of you for caring enough to be here with one another. We may be no more of a target than the public library, or the Deming Logging Show, or a picnic at the Peace Arch. But there's still going to be anxiety in the air, a tendency to stay away from strangers, a lack of energy to absorb one more exposure to sadness, boredom, disappointment, criticism, or 14 more email chains.

So thank you for whatever it is that brings you to be with one another, whether that's courage or magnanimity, or industriousness or meekness or perseverance. All of those virtues rhyme with care (not literally, of course).

It takes courage just to be with one another when we don't know what to say, don't know how to fix things ... when we know we're acting hypocritically, and that's embarrassing, and we're still trying to figure it all out, however long that might take. Thank you for caring for each other, caring for your neighbors, and caring for yourselves. Caring enough to bring your very best, both here and in every area of your lives, and to get up and try again, empowered by the spirit of love, one day at a time.