

Standing on the Side of Love

2013

I was invited by one of our congregations for an organizational consultation and have gone back to visit a handful of times. This is a congregation without a minister, no meeting space of their own and a current total of 20 members. During one of our meetings in which every member (all 20 people) were in the room, I asked the members why they were part of this Fellowship. I asked "Raise your hand if you're here because your friends are here." Two hands went up. Two hands, and I suspect they were referencing each other. Next question. "Who's here because you find Sunday worship healing, restorative, inspirational or transformative." A few hands. "Raise your hand if you're a member of this congregation because you have shared values." Every hand went up. "OK", I said "What are those shared values?"

"The Seven Principles."

"All of them?" (I didn't ask them to name them, since they are the glue that holds this congregation together.) "OK, How do you live out of the Seven Principles?"

"We uphold human dignity."

"Fabulous. How?"

"We accept people who don't have anywhere else to go, especially gay and lesbian people. We have a lot of gay and lesbian members."

"Good to hear, but a minute ago, you told me they aren't your friends."

I'm not telling you this story to embarrass this congregation. In fact, that particular congregation with all their shortcomings actually has quite a lot going for them. I'm relaying the story because it's common. UU congregations wear our welcoming as a badge of honor, proud of our willingness to provide safe harbor to anyone who might otherwise find themselves marginalized. But I worry that we miss a step, or even a few steps.

I used to teach an undergraduate course called Christian Marriage in Contemporary Culture. I discovered in that class, taught over the course of ten years to people ages 19-75, that most people think the problem of love is one of being loved. How can I be loved better? How might others befriend me, notice when I'm gone, take interest in me, take care of me? For some people, it's about finding a partner with whom to share life, again someone who can be for me all I want them to be. And for some, often after being successfully partnered, it's about finding more love- more friends, more community, more places and people to help me feel connected and important and loved. Most people are willing to give back, in fact, they look forward to it. But at the core, the search is about being loved. Sometimes people believe they need to become more lovable, but rarely do they believe they have to become more loving, that they have to learn how to love others better.

I started that course with a simple exercise. I'd ask students to make a list of all the people they loved. In general those lists were as expected: mother, father, sister, brother, boyfriend, best friend, more friends, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Next I'd ask them to make a list of all the truly loving people they've known. Much shorter list. Mother. Great-grandfather. 3rd grade teacher. You, Professor Clarke smiley face.

Often we define our love by a feeling we get about someone and not the way we behave toward them. When we think of people who are loving, our attention shifts toward people who have found a way to embody love in the world. The comparison in the list is really about how love is embodied. How do we demonstrate our love? How do we live lovingly? The first list is about a feeling. The second list is about a way of being.

M. Scott Peck made an important declaration 1978. He told us love is not a feeling. It's a decision. Love is active and it's a choice. Feelings come and go, dissipate and grow. Decisions and the actions we take as a result are far more reliable and real.

Martin Luther King declared our need for a beloved community. His was a fight for justice, but he started with love, he used love as the method and his vision was to end with a community in right relationship, a beloved community.

To create Beloved Community, a place where justice rains down like water, we each need to start with ourselves. We have to find a place of peace, a place of acceptance. That could be a lifetime pursuit and if we want justice, we can't spend our lives meditating, shutting off from the world, but if we can't reconcile some of our own anger, our own internal fragmentation, we cannot be effective agents of change; we cannot create wholeness if we are not whole.

We also need strong, small communities of people ready to face the world, together. We need to know one another, we need to connect with one another. We need to be able to love one another, genuinely. Scott Peck defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth". If we are going to create Beloved Community, we have to be willing to extend ourselves in service of each other. By the way, I think we have to be careful not to worry about how much everyone else is extending themselves in service of us. Know what I mean? Sometimes this conversation can veer off- then we go back to honest self-reflection and remind ourselves about the skill of acting lovingly.

With enough contemplation to be effective and to be a strong community with whom to live and love and work, we are ready to embody love in the world. Not political action. There's a difference. If there wasn't a difference, we wouldn't be a religious community, but a social club for liberal activists. We're not. We're a religious community. We're here to bring love into the world, to save humanity from ultra-individualism and to provide respite for everyone, including the marginalized. We're here to embody the grace of love, to learn how to be loving and to work together to create a community- both within and outside of our walls – that loves so much we manifest justice.

For that work to be sustainable, it has to be grounded in kindness and connection here. The Unitarian Universalist charge is, I believe, three-fold. It is to create beloved community in our congregations, to create beloved community so strong others want to join by the sheer beauty of who we are together, and to create beloved community so bright our light and warmth is known for miles around. Because of our Beloved Community, the hungry are fed, the grieving are comforted, the lonely are befriended, the poor are empowered, the marginalized are embraced. It is our charge to live lovingly, and to do it so well, we change the world.

In 2009, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched our most successful campaign. Standing on the Side of Love. It's not a political campaign, although it's already had some serious political implications. It's a religious campaign, one that calls us to our best selves. Like any good mission statement, it's wide open, both declaring a truth that already exists AND pushing us to personify it all the more. It's short but long in its intentions; it's humble but powerful in its implications. And it's multi-dimensional. It started with a shooting at the UU church in Knoxville by a man disturbed by our commitment to inclusion and it was a beacon of light when hundreds of UUs took action against injustice for people without documentation in Arizona. The words alone – Standing on the Side of Love – have brought hundreds of people into our doors after seeing that bright yellow banner displayed outside church doors.

We don't have a banner, or more accurately, we don't have a place anyone might see that banner, but we do have the ability to shine our bright light.

I'm jumping a little far ahead. Before we illuminate the entire Hudson Valley with our fabulousness, we have to start at the beginning.

Self-reflection. Sustainable justice work begins with spiritual practice. We have a shared practice here. We worship together for an hour every Sunday. Some of us have additional practices. We might sit in silence, practice Yoga or Zazen, go to therapy or a 12-Step program. For some of us music connects us to our deepest selves and for some full engagement in a covenanted group does it. The path matters less than the walking. If we are going to transform the world, we have to have a way of taking personal inventory, seeking forgiveness, and grounding ourselves with the Source of our Being.

We also have to shore up our own community. If we are going to illuminate the world with love and hope, let's make sure we're bringing that message to our own community as well. I know I said before our Reboot that some things have to lie fallow for a time to see what new life will take root. I'm not taking that back; I think it's a good spiritual principle. But, I'm aware that the committees that feed our own community most are the ones that depopulated. We no longer have a Caring Committee. We no longer have a Stewardship Committee. We have almost no one making coffee or setting up our chairs or greeting new-

comers. Our Membership Committee is bare bones. I put this out to you only for your consideration. Are you engaged in creating a Beloved Community here at home?

As a religious organization, more as Unitarian Universalists, we know the world needs change not because of a particular political viewpoint but because part of our shared spiritual practice is a deepening relationship with the interconnectedness of existence. We know that there is no us/them, there is only us, all of us. And those are healing words. There is only us. One human family, one planetary family, all living together on this overcrowded and fragile planet. We could become yet another dissenting voice, another “them” in a room of “thems” or we can exhibit our vision of love and inclusion. We can declare, yellow banner and all, that where there is love, there we will be, always championing the option that champions love.

Do you all remember SuperStorm Sandy? I’ve visited some of the congregations in the areas hit hardest. I’ve never been there for anything related to Sandy, but it doesn’t matter what I’m doing there; Sandy is always part of the conversation. UU families that used to have savings have watched bank accounts drain; UUs are trying to help each other, trying to help their neighbors, trying to be safe places for folks feeling really worn out, really tired of fighting for things that were easy just a few months ago. I’ve been stopped in my tracks by congregants and ministers alike sobbing from sheer exhaustion.

While I know we aren’t the perfect Beloved Community, I think we’re doing a pretty good job. We have genuine affection for each other and hold each other in pretty high esteem. We have work to do, but we’re healthy and vibrant and growing. So, I’m wondering if we might be able to reach outside of ourselves and help another UU congregation. There are going to be plenty of opportunities for ways to make our love manifest, but this one happens to be immediate.

The UU congregation in Staten Island is in trouble. They have 60 or 70 members and have been working around the clock to help folks rebuild. I spoke with their minister, Rev. Susan Karlson, recently and she told me that they’ve become a shelter for incoming volunteers, but that the job of sheltering is very complicated. If they had showers, they could be much more effective as a shelter, but they don’t have the time or money to build showers. Do you all remember when we opened a shelter here and the District sent us \$500 with a promise for more if we needed it? Ultimately, the Region collected \$160,000. Unreal, right? And the congregation in Staten Island qualifies for that money, but in order to get it, they need two things. First, they need someone to tell them what the showers will cost to install. They don’t have a contractor in the congregation and are too run down to try to find one. Second, they need help filling out the Region grant to get them the money.

The congregation in Staten Island has asked us to partner with them. They are wondering if we, as a congregation, might be willing to support them as they work to embody love in their neighborhood. So, I’m putting it to you. Can you help? Can we help? Can we move outside of ourselves enough, outside of our busyness, outside of our personal anxieties and worries and desires so that we can act lovingly?

This isn’t easy and it’s not fun. I’m looking for a roofer for my house; I’m looking for a contractor of some kind to fix all kinds of things inside my house. Who has time to find someone to give an estimate in Staten Island? Who has time to help another congregation when we don’t even have someone to make coffee on March 3rd? Isn’t the need here enough? Shouldn’t we put the oxygen mask on ourselves first?

Standing on the Side of Love is a call to action. It’s a call to create the Beloved Community, to embody love in our own lives, in our congregations and in the world. We aren’t going to do it perfectly, but that’s not part of the charge. The charge is to do, to support, to stand with what is most loving.

Standing is different from falling. We speak often of falling in love, as if it’s passive and we have lost our ability to choose. Standing is about choice, about making decisions. Love is a decision. Standing on the Side of Love is a decision, a way of being, a way of living.

We Stand on the Side of Love when we worship together, deepening our own spiritual lives, reconciling ourselves to ourselves. We Stand on the Side of Love when we are welcoming to people who might be marginalized in other religious communities. We Stand on the Side of Love when we put our own anxieties aside long enough to help another who is suffering. We Stand on the Side of Love when we refuse to add to the cacophony of negativity and speak only to that which is most life-giving. When we befriend each other, when we fight for justice, when we speak the truth, when we give respite to the tired, we are embodying our deepest principles and we are Standing on the Side of Love.