

“What does it mean, to welcome?”
Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz
First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo
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My personal journey of welcoming began during my second year at university. I was matched up for a class project with a man, who, like me, was shy and reserved. Initially we were quite awkward with each other. But as we worked together on this project, we started to have a lot of fun. We shared a similar sense of humour, and a love of the subject, so we decided to form our own two-person study group.

I'm not sure when it occurred to me that he was gay – I don't actually remember thinking about it. I know it wasn't something that he spoke of, and I assumed, I guess, that he didn't want people to know.

Someone asked me once if I thought he was gay and I said no. I knew otherwise, but wasn't sure how to answer, and whether it was a secret.

I thought of this person as one of my closest friends.

And yet, it wasn't until several years later that we were able to speak of such things. We were living in a different city. He was living a completely different life, supported by friends who had introduced him to the gay community, and he was supporting others in his turn.

My friend was himself, but more so. He was no longer reserved. Even his smile had changed. It was open. The warm person inside, who I had gotten to know only because we worked on a project together, was now warm on the outside as well.

I think of it as a sort of miracle.

Not everyone gets to have that miracle.

We live in a society

- Where Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender teens hear slurs an average of 26 times a day;
- Where 26% of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Trans youth are told to leave home; and
- Where 51% of trans-identified people have attempted suicide

[PFLAG Canada <http://www.pflagcanada.ca/en/index-e.asp>]

(These *are* Canadian statistics, by the way.)

When I am questioned as to why I promote the welcoming congregation program, I know that it isn't a question of thinking that these statistics are ok. Quite the contrary. In my experience, the people in our congregations want to extend respect

to everyone they meet, regardless of gender, sexuality, skin colour, or ethnicity ... that's one of the reasons why our Unitarian communities are a good fit for us.

I know that when people question the welcoming congregation program, it is sometimes because they wonder if it is really necessary – aren't we already welcoming? Some of us wonder if we should be singling out a group of people simply because of their sexuality, or their gender – is this really in line with our values? Aren't we forcing people to identify and explain themselves – what if they don't want to? And what about ethnicity, skin colour, social class – isn't discrimination based on these issues of equal or greater concern at this point?

These are important questions, and they are my subject this morning.

But first of all, what is the welcoming congregation program?

In the 1980s the Unitarian Universalist Association – which at that time included both Canada and the United States – started to raise awareness about how lack of understanding was a significant barrier to full participation of gay, lesbian and bisexual people in congregational life. In spite of their best intentions, many congregations maintained practices that excluded gay, lesbian and bisexual people from our communities (awareness of the issues that transgender people face came later).

The association developed the welcoming congregation program, to help congregations educate themselves and to encourage them to speak out for their values.

Some of the workshop titles include: How Homophobia Hurts Heterosexuals; Connections to Other Forms of Oppression; Gender Socialization and Homophobia; and Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality.

It includes explicitly religious content, precisely because religion has been such a prominent tool for persecution.

Religion, which is supposedly about love, belonging, and the miracles of growth and healing, has often been a force for the exact opposite -- actively injuring people's sense of self by telling them that they are wrong, or evil, or damned to hell, just for being who they are.

In the face of that history – and current practices today here in Canada, and around the world in countries like Iran – if we are going to call ourselves religious, we have a responsibility to speak up and say that discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people is not inherent to religion or being religious, as some religious groups would like to make believe.

Such discrimination has more to do with fears of difference, and the desire to promote unity by finding a scapegoat.

In our children's story this morning [*Elmer and Rose* by David McKee (2005)] we saw the surprise of Elmer and Wilbur when they were confronted by a surprisingly pink elephant:

"Oh" they said, rocking back on their hind legs. "Very pretty" said Elmer, quickly – realizing that his visible surprise was not the most welcoming response.

Over the course of the story, Elmer and Wilbur learn to expand their understanding of what it means to be an elephant – there are possibilities beyond grey and patchwork.

Elmer and Wilbur are lucky: the grandfather in charge of their education wants to make sure that they understand and value diversity in life.

Not everyone is this lucky.

Grandpa Eldo knows that it matters what we teach our children.

As adults we know that there are a range of responses to difference, and that sometimes the shock of difference, the discomfort of the new is manipulated into fear and hatred.

Religion, which is supposed to be about being fully alive and human, which is supposed to be about growth and healing, has frequently been manipulated to maintain the unity and superiority of one group of elephants over another, to teach hatred instead of love.

This makes it even more important for those of us who belong to religions with a different message to speak up. Hell and damnation are not the only options.

As Unitarians and Universalists, we have a powerful heritage of love, acceptance and activism.

From our *Universalist* forefathers and foremothers, we inherit a radical belief in the goodness of each person. In the nineteenth century, they said 'God loves each of us – we are all are saved, no-one is predestined for hell – therefore it is up to each of us to live out that love by working for the good of all'.

From our *Unitarian* foremothers and forefathers we inherit a healthy dose of rational inquiry and the mandate to question authority—even (perhaps especially?) the authority of our own beliefs. In the nineteenth century they called it 'self-culture' saying that we each need to educate ourselves in order to make the best choices and decisions.

We have made some progress on this path.

Married couples come in both heterosexual and homosexual varieties, and as Unitarians, we played a supporting role in this transformation.

Those of you who are newer might not know that in 2004, our national association, the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) made a statement to the Supreme Court of Canada in the matter of equal marriage rights for same sex couples. The CUC's legal team argued that "law should not be used to enforce the tenets of a particular religion" and that barring same-sex couples from equal marriage was blatant discrimination [CUC Press release 14 May 2004 available at www.cuc.ca/QUEER/IntervenerStatus.pdf].

As Elizabeth Bowen, a past president of the Canadian Unitarian Council said at the time,

"Many opposed to equal-marriage have implied that all religions are on their side. On the contrary, faiths across the country are dismayed when the "religious" view is appropriated by strident voices that stand in opposition to this human right." ["Rainbow Connection" press release, available at www.cuc.ca/queer/rainbow_press_release.htm]

Our voice matters, and it is still needed. As a democratically organized association – both at the congregational level and at the national level – we require a vote in order to speak out on an issue. When I speak in public, I share my own opinion. I can only speak FOR the congregation when you give me the authority to do so. A 'yes' to the welcoming congregation program allows me to make a strong statement about what this community thinks and stands for. And it gives a stronger voice to our national association as well.

But legal and institutional change is only a part of the 'social change' equation. The other part happens in our relationships, our conversations, how we treat each other. Although the vote to become a welcoming congregation is important, it isn't just an end in itself. Becoming welcoming is a journey. Part of the process of living into this journey is recognizing the need to educate ourselves about what it means to live in a homophobic and transphobic society.

As a heterosexual woman, I don't have to worry about someone condemning me from a pulpit because of the gender of the person I married. I don't have to worry about my doctor asking me irrelevant questions about my gender and sexuality when I'm sick.

This ability to *not* have to be aware of a particular aspect of our being—like the gender of those we choose to share our lives with—is called privilege.

Privilege affects each of us to different degrees in different situations.

For those of us with some form of privilege in the realms of gender and sexuality, part of the welcoming journey is about becoming a better ally.

Being an ally means taking educating ourselves about the diversity of humanity. What does it mean to be transgendered, or transsexual, or intersex? What sort of experiences do you have in your life, as a result?

Being an ally does not mean singling out people in the congregation for their sexuality or gender and forcing them to explain themselves.

Being an ally means taking responsibility for un-learning some of the assumptions that are commonly held in our culture. It means being attentive to responses. Often, I only find out I've made an assumption that is contrary to my stated values through the words or actions of someone else.

Sometimes these things catch us by surprise. Several years ago, I was at a church in coffee hour, greeting newcomers. I was talking to a couple who had just come to the church for the first time. They had just moved to the city. We were talking about our lives. I'm not sure what I said, but the woman paused and looked at me. We're brother and sister, she said.

With no factual information, I had made an assumption about who these people were and why they were living together. And it was not true.

Some of you, I am sure, are used to such misplaced or mistaken assumptions. Being constantly on the wrong side of assumptions means choosing to explain or not to explain, means always having to explain or educate, or worse, fear reprisal.

This is where allies can help.

An ally is someone who is willing to look at their own privilege, and what it allows them **not** to think about. An ally does this work for their own good so that they can be active in creating the kind of society they dream about.

It is not always comfortable, being an ally. It requires that I see myself as I might wish not to be seen: my pettiness, my fears, my inability to sit with embarrassment, awkwardness or discomfort.

It is soul work, and soul work can be hard work.

What leads us on, on this journey?

In two words, love and community – there **IS** more love, somewhere [in the words of the hymn we sang earlier this morning, #95, There is More Love Somewhere].

Joan Wiley, a Unitarian from St. Catherine's Ontario, tells the story of standing at a Toronto gay pride parade with a sign saying "I Love My Trans Son".

Says Joan,

A young man "grinned and waved when he saw my hand-lettered neon sign -- "I Love My Trans Son" -- and started jabbing his finger into his chest, indicating that he too, was someone's trans son. I waded into the crowd, sign and all, to give this stranger a hug.

We embraced for a very long time, and then he whispered: "I wish my mom had been as understanding as you."

It was this comment that broke Joan's heart open, and impelled her to form a support group for parents of Trans children – she had had the thought years before, but had been too exhausted by her own journey to do anything about it.

Now, hearing the ache in this young man's voice, out of the response of her heart, she was moved to action.

Joan moved from supporting her own family to supporting others, offering ways for families to find support, knowing that a strong support network is so important for people who are experiencing discrimination of any type, and that often these same people are being shunned, or merely tolerated by the very family that should be **supporting them**. [story from "Celebrating the Rainbow 'straight' from the heart", address originally delivered Feb. 12, 2006 by Joan Wiley-Storm to the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, available at www.cuc.ca/QUEER/StraightFromTheHeart.pdf]

Tolerance is not sufficient. It is better than outright discrimination, of course.

If I tolerate you, it means that I am allowing you to be – I am not actively discriminating against you, but neither am I helping to make society a better place for you. Tolerance doesn't make me sufficiently aware enough of the other person, sufficiently concerned to make sure that they are flourishing, and not being hurt.

Understanding is more help. Understanding requires some knowledge of the particulars. For me to say that I understand you, I have to have made some sort of effort – perhaps we've talked, or someone has told me about you. Understanding means that I have begun the journey of seeing what the world looks like from your perspective.

Acceptance is even more powerful. I don't just know you, I value you, I affirm your being. Acceptance offers the gift of dignity. It can bring healing to the scars of discrimination and intolerance, which made people feel bad about who they are.

But even this is not enough. We need to see people “as they want to be seen, not as we want to see them.” [The Colours of Life: A Purple Border, A Reflection on *Transamerica* Robert Oliphant at Eglinton St. George’s United Church March 5, 2006 <http://www.pflagcanada.ca/pdfs/transamerica.pdf>]

We need celebration. Celebration says ‘not only are you good and worthy, but I can see the gifts that your very presence offers to me’. Celebration is reciprocal: I am affected by you and you are affected by me: we celebrate our knowledge that we are each a strand in the interdependent web of life. This is the highest gift we can give someone: an acknowledgement that we have received something from them, by virtue of their being who they are.

A young trans man had this to say to people who want to be allies:

Educate yourself. Don’t force the other person to constantly have to explain and educate. Respect individuals and their choices: Don’t challenge their experiences, or expect that they will all be the same, as if all straight women or all (whatever) were all the same. Most importantly, know yourself. Think about what makes you uncomfortable, and why.

[based on information from the TransParent Canada website <http://www.transparentcanada.ca/?file=kop7.php>]

Education. Respect. Self-Understanding. Celebration. Soul Work.

Though you can choose to become a ‘welcoming congregation’ by taking a vote, being welcoming isn’t something that you are or are not: it’s a journey.

If we want to live in a society where all people are cherished, where all people, regardless of gender identity or sexuality, have the possibility of living happy and fulfilling lives, this is the journey that we are called to walk.

This is not the only call to action, of course, but it is an important one, and worth making time to hear properly.

It is up to you – the members of this congregation – to participate in welcoming congregation activities over the coming months, and to make a decision as a congregation.

Always remember: there is more love out there.

Amen. Blessed be.