

“The Welcome Table”
delivered by Shari Woodbury on April 12, 2015
at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbus

Select Service Elements

OPENING WORDS (in two voices)

We bid you welcome, who come
with weary spirit seeking rest.

*Who come with troubles that
are too much with you,
Who come hurt and afraid.*

We bid you welcome, who come
with hope in your heart.

*Who come with anticipation in
your step,
Who come proud and joyous.*

We bid you welcome, who are
seekers of a new faith.

*Who come to probe and explore.
Who come to learn.*

We bid you welcome, who enter
this hall as a homecoming,

*Who have found here room for
your spirit.
Who find in this people a family.*

Whoever you are, whatever you
are,

Wherever you are on your journey,

[together] *We bid you welcome.*

OPENING HYMN:
#354, "We Laugh, We Cry"

COMMON PRAYER

I invite you now into a mood of meditation – a time of prayer for some, of quiet reflection for others. Let us share a few moments of silence before I offer a pastoral prayer...

As we breathe in and out together in this open sanctuary, may we be aware of the space inside us. May we be aware of the spaciousness among us, that allows us to bring our full selves here, to this place – laughing or crying, whatever is going on in our lives, whoever we are. Spirit of life, quiet Presence in our hearts, we believe in life, and the strength of love, and we have found a place to be together. Help us here to draw support from one another, and to share our vision of beloved community with the wider world.

Our hearts go out to common people suffering all over the world, from those torn by civil strife in Yemen, to families of university students killed in Kenya... and so many more whose troubles have not made the headlines here. May our leaders be guided in wisdom as they shape relations with other nations, from Iran and Cuba to many other parts of the globe.

We hold in our circle of care, too, those here at home who do not feel secure – those who do not feel safe in their own homes, those even right

here in Columbus who struggle to provide for their families, those in South Carolina and virtually every other state who fear for their lives in their own neighborhoods and communities. May we work to change the culture in our country that makes violence and poverty all too common among our people.

May we plant the seeds for a different future, so that our children and our children's children may live where all are safe in the neighborhood... all are welcome in the church... all are cherished around the family table... all are members of one human family, one earth community, needing and caring for one another. So may it be. Amen.

OFFERING

It is a time of growing abundance outside. From the green buds on the trees to the spring onions dotting the lawns, to the daffodils and grape hyacinth and many other blooms heralding spring, nature's cup overfloweth. May we give in a similar spirit, to share the beauty and continue the life of this community. Please give with a generous heart, according to your ability. The morning's offering will now be received.

SPECIAL MUSIC

[At the end of the Words for All Ages about including everyone, we watched the music video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92OM5bdQ4N4>. The kids stayed through the song and many people young and old danced and sang along.]

Responsive Reading *by George E. Odell*

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need on another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

SERMON

When I moved to Indiana almost 20 years ago, I didn't know anybody here. I remember vividly the people who made me feel welcome. One of those people was a woman named Katie who was in my graduate program in sociology at Indiana University. During orientation week, in-between evenings unpacking moving boxes, I met my new classmates. I remember chatting with Katie over the big wooden table in the Institute for Social Research. We talked about our families, our college experience – she had

gone to school in my home state of Iowa, as had I – and even about religion. In fact, when I told her I had serious spiritual questions and interests, but never thought I'd be at home in a church, it was Katie who told me about Unitarian Universalism. She had attended All Souls Unitarian in Indianapolis with her sister-in-law, and thought there was probably a Unitarian Universalist church in Bloomington too, that I might like to visit. Long story short, Katie and I hit it off right away. Here was a kindred spirit, who would be part of this new adventure. I was relieved to have found a friend in my new community.

I could've just stuck with Katie, or a small circle of friends – like our 4-person mah jong group, who met monthly to play the game, shoot the breeze and share chocolate. But I wanted more than individual friendships. I wanted to be part of our community of grad students. So I organized several game nights and get-togethers for other members of my entering class. For someone as introverted as me, party-planning was unusual behavior. I got to know a bunch of interesting people, and the faculty marveled at how close and supportive our cohort was, in an academic environment that is often quite competitive.

I also picked right up on Katie's suggestion to see if there was a local Unitarian Universalist church (or UU church for short, as we say). What she had told me about it – an open-minded, inclusive people seeking to live their values – had intrigued me. I remember who welcomed me there too. I met other young adults and went out for lunch with them after church a couple times a month. We'd huddle up after the service, choose a restaurant that fit our culinary tastes and student budgets, carpool over together, and put as many tables together as we needed to. There was always room at the table for everyone.

The other group I quickly joined at the church was the choir. I loved learning and singing the music together, and I experienced a sense of beloved community in this joyful multi-generational group. The choir was like a little family, mothered by the director, Sue – who learned every person, every face and voice, in the group. A singer named Bob always had a big, bright smile for me. He would ask me how things were going and make small talk. I knew Bob noticed when I was there and was glad to see me. I've seen him do the same thing with many other people, especially young adults – as a college professor he has a soft spot for students.

And there were others at my first UU church who made me feel welcome. Elizabeth the hat lady, who greeted people at the door and always had stories to tell. The minister, Rev. Carlson at the time, who once hosted the young adult group at her home for dinner. She fed us delicious lasagna. (I remember that lasagna distinctly – never underestimate the importance of food!) The other young adults – many just as new as me – were equally important to my sense of welcome, as they actively sought to connect with me and include me. You don't have to be a long-time member of a church community to help others feel valued.

I invite you to reflect for a moment on who made *you* feel welcome at the UU table when you first visited this congregation, or another congregation you've been part of... Whose smiling face and friendly voice comes up for you?

Of course, when we go to a new place, a warm welcome is never guaranteed. One of my life transitions that was much rougher was the move from elementary school to junior high. In the small Iowa town where I grew up, we had three elementary schools feeding into the junior high. I had had a succession of "best friends" move away during grade school. I

started seeing a lot less of some of the other kids I had played with, too, as we began to be guided into different academic tracks. Rather than being with the same large class and teacher the whole day, in junior high we moved from classroom to classroom.

Lunch was also divided into different periods, so I couldn't count on seeing the kids I knew best from my old school in the lunchroom. And one of the girls I had been friends with had turned into a mean girl; she would play with me on the weekends and at church, but would not acknowledge me anymore at school. There were things I enjoyed about junior high, but I have a painful memory from 7th grade of coming into the lunchroom with my rectangular tray of cafeteria food, and looking down the rows of tables for a space where I could sit, someone I knew who would be friendly. Cliques were forming. There was *not* room at the table for everyone. Eventually I met a new girl whose family had just moved to town. By 8th grade, Tanya had become my new "best friend" and my lunchroom dilemma was resolved. I was no longer lonely and forlorn every time I got to the end of the lunch line with my tray and had to find a place to sit. It still stings to remember it, though. No one likes to be left out.

The ironic thing is, a lot of those other adolescents in the lunchroom were probably *not* trying to exclude me. They just weren't paying attention. The other two elementary schools were each about twice as big as the one I had attended, so kids from those schools could find each other more easily. Outgoing students also made new friends more easily than I did. The people who already had friends at the table just weren't looking around. They were just happy to be with their friends. It's a pattern that adults can play out, too. After my first year in grad school, when I reached out and made new friends, I didn't arrange any get-togethers for the next

wave of new students; I had settled into my own friendships and routine. This can even happen at church coffee hours, when established members come eager to reconnect with people they know, and sometimes with committee business to attend to as well. If we aren't intentional, our table may in practice not be a very welcome table.

Junior high was memorable for me in another way. It was during that time that I rejected the creedal formulas of my family's Methodist church, and decided not to become a member. I was probably the most engaged student in my confirmation class. I just didn't feel I could stand up in front of the congregation and honestly say I believed that Jesus was born of a virgin and was resurrected after death. I didn't understand why these declarations were considered the heart of the faith. Why focus on these improbable miracles of Jesus' birth and death, instead of the way he lived his life? Everything I needed to know about Jesus, I felt, I had learned in nursery songs: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

Yet, despite my chafing at orthodoxy, I would've loved for more of my junior high classmates to have taken the example of Jesus and his early followers to heart. Like how un-picky Jesus was about the company he kept. It was come as you are (come, come whoever you are). Fishermen, prostitutes, tax collectors, rabble of the empire... it didn't matter. That was what was so radical about communion in the early Christian community – that everyone shared equally at the same table, shared the same food, the same wine, the same bonds of fellowship, one with another. As church scholar Justo Gonzales writes of those early Christians, quote, "they gathered weekly to break bread in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Those early communion services did not center on the Lord's passion [his

death on the cross], but rather on his victory through which a new age had dawned. It was much later – centuries later – that the focus of Christian worship shifted toward the death of Jesus. As a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, in the earliest Christian community the breaking of the bread took place ‘with glad and generous hearts’ (Acts 2:46) – the word ‘generous’ probably referring to the sharing of food.”ⁱ (end quote)

The miracle that the early Christians had witnessed during Jesus’ life, which they gladly carried on, was his disregard for the hierarchies and social divisions of the Roman empire. The new age they had begun to experience through his ministry was an age of love and equality – an age of caring for everyone, sharing with everyone. As the apostle Paul later wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). That’s why Jesus was considered a radical, both politically and spiritually – to him, human hierarchies of race, class and gender had no bearing on how we should treat one another. All were part of his beloved community.

People who want to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, who see the image of God within each person – such people in any age trouble the status quo and its defenders. We’ve seen that here in Indiana recently, first with the attempt to ban same-sex marriage, and after that ban was reversed by the court, in the reactionary piece of legislation ironically named the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). And we see it in the disdain and disregard for the poor that has long been rampant in our society. We all know that Martin Luther King, Jr. led the civil rights movement to significant victories, winning desegregation and voting rights for African Americans. We are less likely to remember his next step: building a movement to unite poor people of all races and backgrounds. A

few months into this new venture, MLK was assassinated, and the Poor People's Campaign did not last long. So, many people of all colors and cultures are still living on the margins of our society – more with every passing decade in the American empire. We are still divided. In this regard, a communion table where all participate as equals is still a radical act.

Of course the sacrament of communion did evolve over the centuries. It became something rather different from what those early Christians practiced. Some UU churches do offer communion with bread and wine from time to time, in a spirit more similar to the early Christian communities – not the theology that says Jesus died to wipe the slate of sin clean for the rest of us. What Unitarian Universalists are more likely to practice are things like flower communion and water communion – rituals of our own invention. Such rituals reflect the spirit of valuing each person, in a way not unlike those early Christians' breaking of bread together with counter-cultural egalitarianism.

But probably the most universal UU sacrament of fellowship occurs after worship: coffee hour. Coffee hour, along with the time just before Sunday services, is one of the very best times to be intentional about practicing hospitality. It's something we need to do a better job of around here. Because frankly, our visitors do not always feel welcome. People who might otherwise find this congregation to be a good spiritual fit for them, sometimes visit, and are turned off because of their experience before and after the service. Some people who visit us have left, never to return, because they ended up feeling as forlorn and awkward at coffee hour as I did in that junior high lunchroom. Of course that's not how we mean for it to be. That's why we must get proactive about this.

Perhaps you have been thinking that some people are just naturals at hospitality. If you remember someone who made you feel like you belonged here, they are likely such a person. But making room at the table for everyone is something all of us can learn to do better. And we have some very bright people from this congregation, experienced trainers and friendly folks, who are putting together a workshop on just this topic. The hospitality training will be offered twice in coming weeks. The first time will be on Weds. evening, April 29. The same training will be offered after coffee hour and a light lunch on Sunday, May 3. This hands-on training will help participants learn how to be intentional and inclusive in the way we practice hospitality on Sundays, so that this becomes second nature.

We invite each member and friend of this congregation to invest a couple of hours in one of these workshops. *You* can help make room at the table for everyone here. That holds if you are a longtime member, if you have been around a few years, and if you have been coming here less than six months. Newer folks can help others remember what it's like to enter this community, and navigate its building and culture for the first time. After the training there will be an opportunity to become part of an ongoing hospitality team with flexible volunteer options. But we hope to have many more people participate in the training, beyond those who might serve on such a team. Because the truth is, regardless of who takes on specific duties, our whole church community is the hospitality team. If you are here on Sunday morning, the way you interact with newcomers impacts their experience here. There will be a table at coffee hour today, staffed with people who can sign you up for the workshop, and send you away with a save-the-date card for your planning. Look for Marty Iwamuro [Marty wave your hand].

From listening to people talk about your history, I've learned that one of the challenges to building this congregation has been beloved members and leaders periodically moving away, leaving a void. In this age of geographic mobility, we have to be good at laying out the welcome table for new people on a continual basis – just to hold steady as a congregation.

It's small comfort to know that this challenge is not unique to our church or our time. But some things are different from previous eras of this congregation. The American middle class has been shrinking for decades, a trend that got worse with the Great Recession and has yet to turn around. The structure and make-up of families is more diverse than ever. And several successive generations of church leaders have aged. Their children are grown and gone and now we have a wave of weddings coming this summer. So we don't have the same core of younger families who can commit a lot of time to volunteering for the church. All of this means that we have to not only do a good job of welcoming people when they are new Sunday visitors, but also create new opportunities to connect people in community, in ways that fit their lives. Being friendly is a good start – but we should take it even further than that.

That's my husband's perspective, anyway. When we had been dating for a while, and it came time for him to meet my parents, he had no doubt that they would be nice. Everyone knows how to be polite with company. What he wondered was whether they would really accept him as he was – not just tolerate his presence but embrace him as part of the family. I had told him that I did not believe it would matter one bit to my parents that he was African American, while my family is Euro-American. Or that he was the first in his family to go to college, while my clan is bookish to the point of nerdiness. (Yes, we like big words.) He didn't exactly take that at face

value. It wasn't that he didn't believe me. But life had taught him that people do not always live by their ideals – even good liberals who believe in racial equality, or good churchgoers who affirm the inherent worth and dignity of people of all socio-economic backgrounds. Of course, my parents were “nice” to him. But it was when they taught him to play hearts, our family pastime, that he began to feel like he belonged. And when they teased him for his continual efforts to “shoot the moon” in that card game. (He can't resist.) And when my mother gave him a hand-knitted scarf, that he still wears in the winter. That is belonging.

So I hope that we will not only be more intentional in our friendliness to visitors, but also make it easy for new people to experience that they truly do belong here. Let us help interested visitors become part of all our activities as a community – whether that means putting out sign-ups for social activities, as was done with the small group dinners recently... or personally inviting a newcomer to a drum circle or sangha meeting or some other spiritual growth activity that reflects their interests... whether it means publicizing how to get involved with our church work or social justice projects... or letting people know how to contact the Nurturing Network, so that we may continue to care for one another in times of need.

I believe this church will better meet its vision – “to be a beacon of diverse religious thought and courageous action” – as we reach out in friendship, to all who might find in this place a spiritual home. It all begins with the way that we gather in on Sunday mornings. Let us make room at the table for everyone. Let us make our table a welcome table, where every person – of every age, class, and race, every sexual orientation and family status and ability – is truly seen and valued. Amen, may it be so.

CLOSING HYMN:
#407, “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table”

CLOSING WORDS

This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of
 hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind
 and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not
 mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we
 must hold the whole world in
 our hands.

(William F. Schulz)

Go in peace and friendship.

ⁱ Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 27.