

Reading:

Peace be Unto Thee Stranger

Peace be unto thee, stranger, enter and be not afraid.

I have left the gate open and thou art welcome to my home.

There is room in my house for all.

I have swept the hearth and lighted the fire.

The room is warm and cheerful and you will find comfort and rest within.

The table is laid and the fruits of Life are spread before thee.

The wine is here also, it sparkles in the light.

I have set a chair for you where the sunbeams dance through the shade.

Sit and rest and refresh your soul.

Eat of the fruit and drink the wine.

All, all is yours, and you are welcome.

Ernest Shurtleff Holmes

I had been invited to apply to write as a student scholar for an interfaith consortium called State of Formation. As part of the application process we had to read colleagues’ blogs and respond to them. I chose what I read randomly, clicking on intriguing subject lines. One of them was entitled; “Do you accept the Seder Orange?” I clicked to learn more. What I read moved me deeply and stayed with me.

The Seder meal marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover. It retells the ancient story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The meal is done in a certain order which moves from slavery to freedom. Traditionally there are six foods on the Seder plate as well as three motzat.

The story goes that in the 1980’s Susannah Heschel, Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, was lecturing at Oberlin College. While there she became aware of a movement to add bread to the traditional Seder plate in an effort to bring attention to the oppression of lesbians in the Jewish community. Susannah took that dream and enlarged it to include not just lesbians, but also gays, transgender, queer and ultimately all traditionally oppressed and marginalized people in the Jewish community. Her message is that the orange symbolizes the abundant richness that all people bring. The orange seeds stand for the homophobia, indeed xenophobia, or fear of unfamiliar people that must be spit out, vehemently rejected. The movement grew and today the orange is included by many on their Seder plates.

Our opening hymn this morning, “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table” has a similar tale of evolution and revolution. Commonly associated with the civil rights movement, the song was sung as part of the sit ins at lunch counters throughout the south during the 1960’s. Singing, “We’re gonna sit at the Woolworth Table”, standing up for their oppressed classmates, students declared the rights of African Americans to be served at the same counter as whites.

This civil rights tune was a revision of an African American spiritual sung by slaves proclaiming their rightful place at their master’s tables. The song originated however with the Seder Table, also known as the welcome table. In our UU hymnal indicative of our commitment to inclusivity, “I’m Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table”, has become “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table” “All kinds of people around that table...” So how are we doing? How full is our table? Who is at our table?

My fear as I ask those questions is that your answer is, “Not so good”. Though I know we mean well when we say that, it is a dangerous response because it perpetuates exactly what it is that we want to change. By calling ourselves out on how diverse we are *not*, we alienate ourselves from the power and the good within ourselves that can address that. It is an insidious way to keep ourselves stuck.

Or maybe you are on the other side of the question. When I ask, “How are we doing? How welcoming are we? How big is our table?” Maybe you answer, “Good. Gosh darn it. We are doing good. We are a welcoming congregation, we are working on anti-racism, we are tolerant.” All true. But is that not a form of complacency? We’ve done it, been there, and learned that. There is always more to learn.

We are a welcoming congregation, affirming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people, but what that meant even a few years ago is different today. In fact the landscape of gender diversity is changing so rapidly that as of 2014 the Unitarian Universalist Association stopped printing the Welcoming Congregation Handbook acknowledging that they could not keep the printed form up to date. Instead congregations are encouraged to use resources available in the public domain. Here is what the website says, “It is time to take a new look at what welcoming means, what inclusion and hospitality mean, and how our multiple identities across race and ethnicity, abilities, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity/ expression inform who we are as whole people within Unitarian Universalism.”

Our reading this morning talks about welcoming the stranger. “Peace be unto thee, stranger, enter and be not afraid. I have left the gate open, you are welcome...there is room in

my house for all.” Beautiful imagery. The next line however is key to what it takes for us to be truly welcoming. It reads, “I have swept the hearth and lighted the fire.” (repeat)

What that means to me is that I have cleaned my inner space to make room for the stranger. It means that I have gotten to know the stranger within myself. That I have accepted the parts of myself that are bigoted, afraid, constricted. Have reconciled the origins of such places. Much like how we answer the question of how are we doing as a congregation, we have to ask ourselves. “How am I doing?” Feeling bad about myself in response to the question in that answer is actually a very effective way to stay stuck. Likewise denying that I have more work to do, I stay blind to parts of myself that are holding me back.

To live into as best possible our Unitarian Universalist principles requires that we will not always be comfortable, or feel good. To truly affirm the worth and dignity of every person, live in right relation, honor our own and each other’s truth, in essence be radically hospitable, we will be uncomfortable. We will find those places in ourselves that are anything but accepting. We will learn what we don’t know, which is a lot. And we will be called to change. In the process we will feel many things from love beyond belief to painful discomfort.

Being uncomfortable is not something that most of us know how to do very well. Too many of us have learned by the hypnotic trance of American culture which says that the ultimate goal is to feel good --- all of the time. In an effort to avoid feeling uncomfortable we distract ourselves turning to television, computer games and the like. We numb ourselves, or avoid what make us uncomfortable.

The good news is that we can learn to be uncomfortable. The goal is not to be comfortably uncomfortable, but to be skilled at it. Having the ability to be uncomfortable is a spiritual discipline. It is a discipline because it takes practice. It is spiritual because it is the doorway to the stranger. Both within ourselves and outside of ourselves. It is the fire that transmutes whatever keeps us away from what and who we do not know.

The spiritual practice of uncomfortability requires that we know ourselves and be realistic about what we expect from ourselves. We need others in our life who know us and love us enough to tell us when we’re lying to ourselves, and to remind us when we’re being too hard on ourselves. Paradoxically the most important thing we have to be able to do if we are to be skilled at being uncomfortable is to be able to experience comfort. Take comfort. These don’t have to be big things. In fact most often, they’re not. My comfort comes in the form of exercise, journaling, pulling my hair into a pony tail, drinking a cup of tea.

Having the ability to be uncomfortable, we can then welcome the stranger to our table. The stranger inside of ourselves and the strangers with whom we share this world.

As we ask ourselves how to extend that hospitality to stranger we don’t have to look far. Let’s start right where we are. Gwen Fate and I recently participated in a class which looked at how congregations can be more inclusive to transgender people. I was humbled and inspired by the honesty of the families. They helped me see that we do okay here at All Souls, but there is more that we can do. For example, we have gender neutral bathrooms but they don’t have signs. Imagine name tags that include people’s preferred pronouns. There is much that we can do to be more inclusive in our use of pronouns. We are going to take one small step this

morning by changing the words in the last verse of our closing hymn. The hymn was radically hospitable twenty years ago, not so today. It has in the last verse the words, “gay and straight”. This doesn’t begin to capture the gender spectrum. So instead I invite us to sing, “We are multi-gendered people”. It may feel odd, it may feel liberating. It’s okay.

We will make mistakes as we do our best to be radically hospitable, to ourselves and others. Let’s give each other the benefit of the doubt. Assume that we start in love, and then love each other enough to point out where we have room to grow.

I close with my response to the blog about the Seder Orange. It is dated March 7, 2014. “Esther, what a blessing! I was not familiar with this story. I will hold the phrase, “Do you accept the Seder Orange?” as a personal challenge. It is applicable to so much in life. Do I accept the parts of myself that I deem unworthy of being known? How do I hold onto my beliefs tightly enough to remember the true meaning of Seder and loosely enough to make room for the orange? And the raspberries?”

Amen and Blessed Be.

Let Us Be Still

Oh to that, which is beyond all words.

That eternal and so familiar longing to be known, truly known.

Heard, understood, and seen.

That place in us all which wants to feel as though we are at home.

It is this place that I invite us to enter now.

Here in the depths of our soul.

The parts that no one may know, or maybe they do.

Even if it just one or two.

Here where, whether we realize it or not, the eternal creation of life is at work.

Yearning beyond all yearning to be itself.

At home in our body,

At peace in the world.

Freely. Wholly.

Who we are called to be.

Let us be comfortable enough to stay awhile,

Still enough to hear the true voice

and brave enough to bring it out.

Rebecca M Bryan 3.1.15