

The Unitarian Society of Hartford

On Belonging

Rev. Cathy Rion Starr

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On Belonging, Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Society of Hartford, 5/3/15,

UU theologian George Kim Beach says “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them, and each time new folks join, the whole [‘it’] is literally reconstituted.”ⁱ

By that notion, we just transformed the Unitarian Society of Hartford and made it anew!

Thanks to you all [who just joined in the Membership Ceremony], we are now a new body, reconstituted.

What does it mean to reconstitute the whole? That we are reconstituted because we’ve welcomed you all into formal membership?

It is a reminder that each of us who has come through these doors will someday leave as well. That this covenanted community – this free church – is an organic, changing body. And that each and every one of us here is in a constantly changing relationship to this whole – this place we know and love as the Unitarian Society of Hartford.

“Each organ of the body belongs to a whole that would not be whole without it,” writes the Commission on Appraisal in their book on Belonging that concluded a multi-year study of membership in Unitarian Universalism. “We find our wholeness in relationship, in community with others, people both like and unlike ourselves.

“Individually, we are changed, transformed by our relationship with others; at the same time the community as a whole is changed by the presence and participation of each individual. [And so] individually and collectively we are in a constant state of change, of transformation.”ⁱⁱ

The question for this sermon is about the relationship of the individual to the whole. About how we seek belonging for ourselves, and how we create a culture conducive to belonging for others.

Let me begin with a story.

Last week, Heather, Robin and I were in Bend, Oregon for the Building Dedication of the UU Fellowship of Central Oregon. This is the congregation that Heather served for 6 years, during which time they began the process of searching for a building to buy or build. The new building we entered last week for the first time is stunning. I encourage you to go to UUFco.org or Heather’s Facebook page and see the photos.

When we walked in, I was drawn in to the bright, open Pete Seeger Fellowship Hall, and as I began looking at the view of the high desert sagebrush, Robin tugged on my hand and said “Mama, I have to pee. Where is the kid potty?”

Here at USH, Robin knows where the two kid potties are. (Anybody here know?): there's one in the bathroom near Rayla's office over there, and there is one in the downstairs single-stall bathroom.

So we asked around and found something amazing. Not just a kid-sized potty seat attached to a grown up toilet, but an entire bathroom designed for little ones. Complete with a toilet a foot off the ground, and a sink right at Robin's height. AND a paper towel holder and trash can also at her height, for *her* to use, All By Herself.

It was like winning the lottery!

Robin knew she belonged at that church because she could use the bathroom comfortably. The whole bathroom, and the RE space, was so clearly designed for her and kids like her.

A while later, I sat near the kids' bathroom holding a napping Robin and quietly watching adults tour the new building. One by one, adults saw the kid-sized bathroom and laughed.

I watched adult after adult come and laugh. To our grown up eyes, it seems like mockable miniature.

And yet for Robin, having an accessible toilet –one that she can get onto without help and not worry about falling into is not a mocking matter. She took pride in handing *me* a paper towel, something that she usually can't reach and needs my help with.

The kid-sized bathroom and the RE space clearly designed for little ones told Robin something that no words could: "You are welcome here. This place is for you."

"You are welcome here. This place is for you."

What is it that communicates that for you? That sense that a place is a place you could belong? Here, or in other spaces and communities?

Belonging is about so much more than a welcome sign hung at the door or a warm greeting extended. It is the physical and cultural and interpersonal signals that communicate, "you belong here," that you are not just welcome as a guest.

Signals of accessibility like the kid-potty, or for transgender and genderqueer folks, non-gendered bathrooms like the many we have around the ambulatory, or for folks with limited mobility, accessible bathrooms and automatic doors.

Signals that go beyond welcome, like someone knowing your name AND pronouncing it correctly.

Signals of openness, like seeing a rainbow flag or seeing people in both similar and different, common age or cultural groups.

Beyond a deep welcome and access, “Belonging...means having a meaningful voice, and being afforded the opportunity to participate in the design of social and cultural structures,” writes Ebonye Gussine Wilkins, as part of the “Othering and Belonging” conference last weekend in Berkeley, CA.

[She continues] “Belonging means we lift each other up. Sometimes it takes more strength than we may be accustomed to exerting, but it is for our collective benefit. When we lift up others, we all succeed. We all have the basic human right to contribute to and benefit from systemic structures. ^{“iii}

We are transformed by new ways of belonging that include everyone.

So on this day of welcoming new members, let us reflect on how we can make this a place of more and more belonging. More and more for co-ownership of this endeavor we call USH.

By Wilkins definition, belonging goes beyond feeling at home to co-ownership, shared power, and involvement of/with an ever-expanding circle of people.

When I was a new Unitarian Universalist at the age of 22, I knew that I had found home at the First Unitarian Church of San José because in worship I got to harmonize on the hymns I knew and loved from my Presbyterian childhood but with words that made more sense to me. It was after singing loudly and proudly in the pews that someone near me encouraged me to join the choir – which I did.

I loved being a part of that intergenerational, spirit-filled, justice-seeking congregation, and became a member. Then someone asked me to become a worship associate and then someone else asked me to join the Interim Search Committee.

I was young, I had a full life outside the congregation, and instead of writing me off with stereotypes about young people, or asking me to be on every committee as the token “young person,” people took the time to get to know me and my gifts, and to help me find a meaningful voice in the congregation. I was lifted up and engaged because people took the time to think beyond the “usual suspects” for leadership positions, to get to know me, and to help me find my place.

They went beyond welcome. “When we lift up others, we all succeed” writes Wilkins.

For my part, I showed up. I participated in worship regularly, I pledged, I said Yes to service when I could (though I said “no way!” the first time I was asked to be a Worship Associate). I presented my “authentic, imperfect self” as much as I could.

And I found belonging. I was lifted up. We were all lifted up.

I invite you to reflect for a moment about how you found belonging here – or in another community in which you have felt at home. What did you do to create that sense of belonging for yourself, and belonging for the greater whole?

Our Universalist heritage says that all are saved. In other words, EVERYONE has a right to belong. We here, we Unitarian Universalists, BELIEVE that All Lives Matter. Each and every one. We're not divided into the sinners and the saved. We are each any every one of us imperfect, mistake-making, beautiful and amazing creatures. That includes each one of you.

Universalism says that we are all going to the same place when we die (not some to heaven and some to hell), so let's work together to create belonging for all in the here and now.

I love our Universalist heritage.

And yet: we know that our society – this one, USH and the broader society have not made our vision real yet.

Saying #Blacklivesmatter instead of #alllivesmatter is a recognition that some lives are not valued as much as others, in this lived reality. We NEED to say "*Black Lives Matter*" precisely because Black lives are devalued in our society.

Black folks who lead the BlackLivesMatter movement are saying, "we belong too;" we want (and deserve!) a meaningful voice in the design of the structures of our society. And, conversely, "the killing [of unarmed Black folks by police every 28 hours] is an extreme way of saying, no you don't, your life doesn't matter."^{iv}

As we have watched the events in Baltimore unfold this past week, as we learn more about the way that Freddie Gray's spine was broken in police custody leading to his death, as we learn of charges against 6 Baltimore police officers, and as we reflect on the persistent poverty and disinvestment in much of Baltimore's Black community, it is abundantly clear that society is broken.

There is a gap between this belief we hold dear – that each and every person matters -- and the reality of how we live in the world. Parents of Black kids – including some of you here - have to have conversations with your young (5, 6, 7 year old) children about how to try to stay safe if they encounter police – and white folks by-and-large teach our children that the police are a source of safety. There's a GAP in how we value lives.

I truly believe that we all WANT to live out our universalism. We sing to the power of love and hope and faith that a world without racism and violence is possible. We

believe in a world where keeping everyone safe does not create collateral damage in the form of young lives lost.

And yet, it's hard to see that world from here.

And so sometimes we distance ourselves from the collateral damage.

We judge the "rioters" and "looters" as outside the circle of belonging as we follow the mainstream media's focus on the property destruction, and we forget to focus on the destruction of lives such as Freddie Gray's.

We minimize the issue by saying that those 6 police officers are bad apples, rather than looking at the complex problem that the whole criminal justice system enables such behavior by otherwise good people in uniform.

Joanna Macy talks about the "way we [distance] ourselves [from others]...[as a] phenomenon in our culture today. About ways [we] get too cool, too scared to care, too busy to care, too distracted to care."^v

Sometimes I am too scared or busy or distracted to care. Are you?

Sometimes, I can't turn and face the full reality of the gap between my belief in universal salvation and the brokenness of the world around us.

Sometimes I can't turn and face the full reality of my own imperfections and my own wholeness.

This is why we need church. This is why we need each other. We need each other as company on this journey. We need each to help each of us focus on the world beyond us and our individual concerns. Because belonging is about lifting each other up so we all succeed.

Let us bring our whole selves into this community – with our blemishes and imperfections, with our abundant love and our deep pain, with our gifts to share and our spiritual questions.

Let us open up more and more spaces of belonging. For ourselves. For those who walked through this door the first time today. For those planting down in the community garden. For those over the mountain in Avon and over the bridge in North Hartford.

Let us open ourselves to transformation both individual and collective.

May we open up spaces and encourage "the opportunity [for each and every person] to participate in the design of social and cultural structures."

Because in doing so, even though it may seem hard, we are ALL lifted up.

May it be so.

ⁱ Beach Minns lectures, as quoted in Belonging COA report

ⁱⁱ Belonging – COA Report, p.103 [based on Paul’s metaphor]

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/blog/2015/4/3/what-is-othering-and-belonging>

^{iv} john a. powell – Othering & Belonging Saturday morning transcript, 4/26/15

^v Joanna Macy, Othering & Belonging Saturday transcript, 4/26/15