

Sacred Curiosity

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 10, 2023

My friend shared with me the text of this email, this gift, this life affirming message, this beacon of hope and love and transformation and acceptance. “You helped me change the way I viewed myself and other people,” the author of the email wrote. “You helped me see the good and through this I was able to see others in a much deeper way.” My friend was touched and surprised – this note was written 20 years after the initial encounter. She posed to me the question – what had she done that led to such a transformation? Both persons in this story have granted me permission to share.

It is clear from the email that the author – we will call him Steve – had initially viewed himself as an outcast, an outsider. And yet he left cues as to what changed his perceptions. My friend and I took time to sit and unpack the words on her laptop screen, reminiscing on times past. My beloved friend saw Steve as a full person – fuller than he saw himself. She engaged with him – entirely curious, asking him questions that allowed him to divulge to her who he truly was. She offered him radical welcome into her life, and he accepted this, and her kindness and innate curiosity - her innate curiosity - changed Steve’s interaction with himself and with the world. She welcomed Steve – merely welcomed him – just as he was – into her life in radical, profound, and yet powerfully simple, unassuming ways.

What is so utterly beautiful about welcome? It is the gateway through which each person’s full humanity is brought to life, treasured, celebrated, each person deemed worthy and deserving of goodness, kindness, and love. Welcome is formulaic in a way. We must first ground ourselves in curiosity – always wondering about one another – stripping ourselves of indifference, judgment, or animosity. We are then called to the spiritual practice of asking about one another’s stories – asking holy questions – of strangers and friends alike. “What brings you joy?” “How do you fill your days?” “What do you need in this moment?” It is an invitation to love - who you are, no matter how broken, how insecure, how distraught, no

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matter how joyful, how inspired, how full - or any combination thereof - you are welcome in my heart, my life, my church. My vocation as a minister invites me to ask questions of each of you, curious of your spirit, your soul, your journey, your pain, your joy. "How is your heart?" I ask – and in hearing your responses I feel a great honor, journeying through life with each of you – curious, always curious. This is why I am a minister. And yet one does not need to be clergy to embrace this practice of love.

I want to take a moment to offer a caveat. There are those who have done us and others great harm, who are deeply immersed in -isms and in detrimental hate, those who for myriad reasons cannot be a part of our lives or share in our love or are welcome in our doors. This sermon is not for those few anomalies, but for the masses - the vast array of us. Let us now return to love.

We can repeat the mantra "We bid you welcome" but unless we deeply contemplate the phrase its meaning is empty, the sentiment lost as soon as the words leave our lips. What does it mean to bid all welcome? It is to embrace those whom society has shunned, ostracized, ignored, those who face violence and discrimination. The marginalized, Indigenous persons, Black persons, the impoverished, the ill or disabled. What is your story, beyond appearance, beyond prejudice, beyond innate assumptions and implicit bias? Who are you – as a person, not an archetype? To engage in welcome is sometimes to ask those questions that foster solidarity as one's pain is echoed in the story of the other – hearts and souls bearing similar hardships and sorrows – love fostered as broken hearts mirror one another. It is also – and perhaps sometimes the hardest practice – to welcome those we disagree with – an opportunity to build bridges, to embrace differences, to inquire about that which fosters opposition, animosity, anger – denying those simple and easy emotions of dislike and disregard and instead to do that radical work of curiosity, love, and welcome. To simply offer, "Tell me more."

It is a tenet of our faith that we are held together – all of us – in our interdependent web of life. In ways well beyond our sense perceptions, we are connected to one another, to the earth and all she offers, to the sacred, whatever that may be, to the broken, the lost, the sorrowful, to the

prosperous, the celebrated, the content. We are held together – that is inevitable. But will these strands – what I liken to the threads of a spider web – will they bind us together in love or in hate? In obligation or compassion? In animosity or curiosity? Is that which binds us to all that is, was, and ever will be life-giving, or life-taking? Who we are and what we do ripples out far beyond those living things within our grasp, reverberating out to countless souls we will never meet. Do we send to the edges of this planet we call home curiosity, welcome, and love, or do we cloak the world one action at a time in hate, judgment, and animosity? I invite us to be cognizant of each decision we make, aware of this holy, eternal, persistent web.

Hebrews chapter 13 verse 1 offers us the phrase, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.” I pull from this phrase of biblical insight and wisdom two different reflections on welcome and love. What does it mean in our faith to entertain angels? In my theology we each contain a spark of the divine, a flame of the holy, a piece of us directly connected to the sacred. We are each – in a way – an angel, both to those aware and unaware, and in practicing radical hospitality we welcome not only the finite but the infinite, the Great Mystery, the source of all that is. My second reaction – if we neglect to show hospitality to strangers, we likewise choose to ignore and judge all that is good, loving, and eternal. We reject the beauty of nature, the warmth of that spark within, the love that saturates all that surrounds us. This is what we reject in indifference and animosity.

What I hope to impart here, alongside the wisdom of welcome, is the importance of story. After adopting the spiritual practice of curiosity and inquiry, we offer those holy questions, “What brings you to life?” “What are your passions?” and in doing so invite a narrative in response – a tale, an anecdote, wisdom, insights, personal history. Stories connect us to one another in intimate ways and foster relationship, reinforcing the strands of our web. Welcoming a person welcomes their stories – all of them.

This wisdom has been embraced by many of the world’s religions as they seek to bring lessons and insights to life, to move beyond commandments and doctrines and instead craft narration. Characters become animate and invite the devout one to be curious of the

antagonists and the protagonists. The prophets invite us to see ourselves and our beloveds in these stories made sacred through intention.

Jesus embraced this in his parables. He commanded “love thy neighbor,” a foundational message to those of many faiths, and yet this statement remains stale and empty when offered on its own. Instead, he crafted a story of a wounded man and his prescribed enemy. An injured and dying Jewish man lay on the side of a road. A Levite walked past him with complete indifference. A priest passed the dying one, himself a faith leader, and yet likewise paid no notice. It wasn’t until a Samaritan passed, an enemy of the one on the ground, that he was offered compassion and care and life saving kindness. I imagine the Samaritan offered an intimate question, “how can I help you?” and in doing so welcomed the dying man – his enemy – into his life.¹ We are not offered an order, a command, or a mandate, but an invitation for reflection. To ask questions of ourselves and connect with our own humanity. “What character do I emulate in each of my days?” “How can I live life as exemplified by the Samaritan?” “Will I help any suffering person, even my enemies?”

Buddhists likewise embrace the power of story. Born Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha was raised in a wealthy and privileged family. As he aged into his teenage years, he became uncomfortable with his affluent life and searched for meaning beyond his walls – discovering the prevalence of sickness, old age, and death – the suffering we will all eventually encounter. He left his worldly comforts to become a wandering ascetic, engaging in extreme practices of austerity. One afternoon engaged in meditation – his spiritual practice – he had what Buddhists call an “awakening,” leading to an immediate and profound “understanding of the nature of suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.” This new knowledge led the Buddha to dedicate his remaining decades to teaching the lessons of his awakening, accumulating followers, and initiating a new faith tradition.² Scholar Rupert Gethin offers that his story is not fully historical, nor was it meant to be fully historical, but a narrative meant to

¹ Luke 10:29–37

² *The Foundations of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin pgs. 15-16

be a metaphor, an allegory, a symbol – a universal archetype – a story of all of those who have been and will become buddhas, and, in a way, all of those of the Buddhist faith.³ The story does not dictate or command “live a holy life,” but offers a protagonist who has done so. The narrative offers a plot – a man exposed to suffering, choosing a religious life, acquiring wisdom, and bringing his insights to the world – a story that simultaneously humanizes one of the world’s prophets and offers a roadmap for a devout life. We are, again, posed important questions. “How can I live a life steeped in faith, compassion, dedication, and meaning making?” “How can a commitment to a spiritual practice change my life?”

Let us bring this back to the tenets and stories of our own faith – our commitment to welcome, dignity, worthiness, love, and interdependence. To story. We each have a life-saving narrative of our faith, or in the process of crafting that narrative. That is why we are here today. I have shared with you my story – finding a faith that espoused universal salvation after losing a beloved to suicide. So, I ask a question of you: How are you changed by engaging with all things sacred? How are you changed by the curiosity that love fosters? Our faith reminds us of the inherent sanctity we hold within – angels, each of us – worthy of curiosity and welcome. Worthy of love. Connected. So may we extend our hands and our hearts in simple and profound acts of love, of welcome, asking, even, “What is your name?” May we journey, for a moment, in the shoes of Steve, the author of the email we unpacked. May we embody his life-changing journey, his discovery of compassion, self-worth, and a generous love that he offered those in his midst – those changes that came simply by being welcomed.

And may we bring all of this with us today – during Water Communion – as we share our own stories, having been invited to bring with us the water that represents in our hearts places of welcome, of celebration, of laughter or lament, of love, of memories. This is the day of ingathering – as we return from the pause of summer to offer one another – friends and strangers alike – radical welcome into this new church year – welcome into this space, into our faith, into our very hearts, souls, and minds - accepting one another for just who we are. May

³ *The Foundations of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin pg. 16

we bring to this sanctuary and this moment that spiritual practice of curiosity, and enter a blessed time of storytelling. We bid you welcome.

May it be so, and Amen.