

Are “All” Truly Welcome?

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I wonder if we ever think of the theological ramification for saying hello. Think of the variety of ways and reasons for saying hello... Sometimes we say it to welcome, sometimes because it's socially sound, other times we say it with the expectation of what will come from a relationship with that particular person. Now as a Bostonian the first hello I think of is from...Cheers because it's in Boston. Cheers' has one of the greatest portrayals of hello, you know the place where everybody knows your name, and they're all ways glad you came. Granted when people said hello and your name in Cheers it was perhaps a bit sarcastic, but it takes place in a bar so it makes sense, but at least it's sincere.

And we cannot forget the classic hello song of Disney with a certain beauty named Belle. In the musical version of Beauty and the beast a story or rather a fairy tale told by many adults to far too many children and of course blessed and sanctified by the great Disney the keeper and teller of many stories all children should hear...right... They have a whole song where everyone is saying hello to Belle, the leading lady of the story, all the towns people; the butcher, the baker, possibly even the candle stick maker welcome her.

Belle is friendly and all of the people are familiar with her and willing to greet her with arms wide open. Literally the song is called *Bonjour* and from every corner of the town and our screens, she is welcomed. If everyone said hello with such zeal or at least musically, think about how that would forever stay in people's minds. That is how a hello should go. No matter what else is going on welcoming people is a group activity and done in unison according to these musicals. My references come from musicals I grew up on musicals and black and white movies. But alas we live in the real world not musicals.

Hello is one of many steps of how we can gain our first impressions or welcoming ways with each other. They say first impressions are everything, they set the tone, the mode,

where one's future together could, will, and may continue to go...there is a lot of pressure on a simple thing we say a number of times to a variety of people often without much thought to the greeting.

In high school cafeteria politics it is the people we say hello to and allow sit with or not that shows if and who we are welcoming. But this is a bit more than a hello that I am saying to you all. You are about to begin your church year and I am embarking on the journey with you. I am not just sitting at your lunch table, we are swapping stories, snacks, breaking bread, and growing together in community.

For a while I have been on this path towards UU ministry because my passions are intertwined with my faith and spirituality. I have observed that faith, spirituality, and religion are used to justify wars, used to explain beating up kids at school, and harassing people at airports. Far too often religions are used create social and physical violence against one another instead of empowering, supporting, and welcoming all of the people around the world. And this saddens me.

The place and places where we are supposed to allow ourselves to be most vulnerable, even when we do not believe in that or any religious community we assume we can receive acceptance. The truth is the outside world has just as many if not more of these issues, but we are called to show compassion, justice, and love to and for all. Religious communities, churches, synagogues, mosque, temples etc are assumed to do more than engage in the pettiness of the outside world. People think of their faiths as being exemplars and giving guidelines of how to live their lives but they are not fully there yet.

I've heard it said that Sunday is the most segregated day of the week racially. To be more broad the weekend's many Sabbaths keep us divide religiously, which religiously make sense. However the divisions are culturally, racially, genders, sexual orientations and ages as well. And though I am a strong advocate of community space, and the concept of creating safe space within and for our many communities...often I wonder not only as Beverly Tatum's titled her book *Why are all the Black Kids sitting together in the cafeteria*, but why don't they feel welcomed at the other tables?

I suspect it is because though we can say the word Hello, it's the actually welcoming of all that people bring in their embodiment and who they are, that's difficult. We say hello but don't bring your girlfriend with you, or you're both women, or well she's black and your white, or a number of other reasons to reject one another and not welcome all. We really are picking and choosing which aspect of one another we want to say hello to. Believing each part does not make the whole? Or well something's really are too challenging to ask people to be "tolerant" of.

So where is this beloved community we consider to exist, hope to exist, to create? And really why is that even important, why must we really welcome all people, for all they are? Have world leaders? Does this country? Do our schools? Do our neighborhoods? Do our families? I say they might not but they "should" and will, I hope.

I say yes, the human spirit is worth it. To me there is little that is more powerful than the strength of a human spirit. We can build skyscrapers, homes, places of worship and communities within them and without them, but still we struggle to welcome all, to engage in the beloved community. We still struggle with how to not simply say hello but to actually mean it.

The humanist in me says we are capable of so many great things, acts of empowerment, and support, the Black humanist in me says we must empower and support all voices, cultures, and races, the Womanist, or Black feminist, in me says including all genders, and sexual orientations making space for *all* the multiple identities that we hold to both sit at the cafeteria table and sit comfortably. Then the Unitarian Universalist in me says beloved community is possible and we are working towards it to become a reality!

For me this both why I am of this faith, tradition, movement and why I wish to become a parish minister. I want to help create the beloved community. From the youngest goofiest baby to the person who saw the church built up, torn down, and build itself back up as a building yes but as a community as well. To the singer whose always on pitch to the one whose everyone loves and knows but lost the pitch years ago, which is ok, my dad never

has found the pitch. To the meetings into the night and early in the morning. To all the things I have yet to see and learn, I am passionate about Parish ministry.

I look forward to seeing how the beloved community is built, established, and maintained in this community and the many ways beloved community is considered. A lot has happen over this summer, for me at least. I have always felt called in one way shape or form to take part building the beloved community in all of the communities I am of, visit, and grow with. But at different times I felt the pull stronger than others. This summer was one of those times I felt strongly pulled to do more, work more, and fight harder.

Now how many of us have a TSA story from flying? Flying is an amazing thing, with the hurricane we recently had there were many people stranded at airports, how many of us have found ourselves at the airport longer than we'd like? Or walked in the airport line shoeless thanks to TSA not by choice, not to welcoming I'd say. Well I had a similarly bad or troubling experience with the TSA.

It started with the officer that inspects IDs and ticket he seemed to give me an odd look, I sensed it was because I'm female but I wear men's clothes, Airport people do not like confusion right? Then I walked towards the security line and one of the security people gave me a rude look up and down which I saw passed to the other TSA folk.

Then I moved to the part where you removed the usual points of flair belt, vest etc except my head scarf. But they still decided that I needed to be pulled aside and patted down for my "baggy or loose shirt" I was wearing one of my men's button down. Then they patted me down. The way they patted me down publically was a bit aggressive it made it clear to me this was not the standard pat down. But I tried to try calm and silent, we know how airport security can get if you try to complain.

You know that feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when something bad or inappropriate is happening, I had that. I felt like they were trying to publicly prove I am female and wearing men's clothes. After all of this happened I realized while I have experienced the usual standard TSA pullover, the only people of color pullover, the you wear a head scarf hair pat down which makes me I think what if this a hijab?

This was about me being a Black lesbian wearing men's clothing. As a gender variant person I know people get confused so the confusion I expect, questions I'm ok with, but the rudeness and harassment I did not expect to be displayed so blatantly. They used their power to make me feel violated and unwelcomed.

Then I began to look at my experience as a sequence of experiences, one that hold stories, stories that remind me that mine is one of many like me and of stories of people different from me, ones I have to listen to. Stories that need to be brought to life, discussed, questioned, and pushed to create change. I believe we tell one another these stories throughout our lives. From the first time we go to an adult crying as children, to as a teen we are not invited to a party and feel distraught, to the adult thinking this happened to me but what if it was my little sister or brother?

That day I was reminded that I will always have to fight to have and maintain my seat but I have been blessed to remember I must fight for others to sit around the table as well. I have realized that I may never be welcomed to every table but there needs to be a seat for me and those like me and different from me, regardless. And I have been reminded that I should not allow myself to sit in my seats of privilege, till it is made a right. I am questioning why it is given to me and not you, which I am always called to do. My summer mantra has been "such is the world we are called to change" for being part of the change allows me to better view it as a possibility.

In the year to come I will be growing in many ways, I will be giving in many ways, I will be learning many things. But the most important thing I will learn is how to be in community and build a beloved community so that all can sit at the table if they wish. I also plan on slipping, tripping, and tumbling for it is the mistakes that give us opportunity to learn and be humbled all in one. I am honored to have this time with you, to do all of these things and to grow further into my ministry to serve the Unitarian Universalist tradition I love, with all my hyphenations and abbreviations. I am a loud, proud, Womanist, Black, Humanist, theist, Unitarian Universalist, because—as Lady Gag says—"Baby I was born this way."

I am excited to begin the year in a new place in a new space on this new step of my ministerial formation with you. Because, though we are still learning about each other and will continue to do so throughout the year, I know it will be a powerful experience. I am prepared to grow, be challenged and continue to become the minister I am meant to be and bear witness to all of you responding to your various callings.

Blessed be.