

“Association Sunday”
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire

Reading:

Our reading is an excerpt from Audre Lourde’s book *The Cancer Journals* published in 1980. (p.15)

Sometimes fear stalks me like another malignancy, sapping energy and power and attention from my work. A cold becomes sinister; a cough, lung cancer; a bruise, leukemia. Those fears are most powerful when they are not given voice, and close upon their heels comes the fury that I cannot shake them. I am learning to live beyond fear by living through it, and in the process learning to turn fury at my own limitations into some more creative energy. I realize that if I wait until I am no longer afraid to act, write, speak, be, I’ll be sending messages on a Ouija board, cryptic complaints from the other side. When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less important whether or not I am afraid.

Sermon:

The leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association has made a commitment to develop into a faith that is multicultural in our congregations, in our worship, and in our work in the world. Association Sundays began three years ago as an opportunity for Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country to talk about growth initiatives on the same Sunday. This year the topic is “Growing our Diversity”. Our new Association President, Peter Morales was quoted as saying, “America’s future is a multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic future. Our faith must learn to express itself in new ways. If we are to be a vital religious movement, we must develop a multicultural and multiracial ministry. The work we do today to nurture diversity in our ministry is essential.”¹ For our Association Sunday sermon, I considered writing a treatise on how classism shows up in our faith and what we need to do to unpack that and then...I saw a movie about zombies.

Yesterday afternoon, my family and I went to see a comedic horror film called, *Zombieland*², which is about a post-apocalyptic world where most people have been turned into zombies, and the last four humans, that we know about, find each other. Overcoming their interpersonal differences and quirky personality types they forge a family of choice in order to survive in an extremely harsh environment. The message of the movie was about people who were alienated from society, even before the zombie issue, building relationships with love and connection, when it would seem the most hard. I realized on the ride home from the movie that what we need to be talking about today is who we are as a community, and how we foster a community that is open and flexible enough to welcome the stranger.

Part of the good news of Unitarian Universalism that we have a very wide theological tent. There is a lot of room in our faith. AND, it can be challenging for people to enter our communities. We put up road blocks, many of them unintentional, to growth and to expanding our circle of community, in other words, to growing our diversity.

You may have read the article that appeared in the Fall UU World magazine on the Tulsa Oklahoma congregation and the changes that they have gone through in the last year or so. Tulsa

¹ “Diversity of Ministry Initiative Settles Two New Ministers”, <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/151377.shtml>

² This is by no way a ministerial endorsement of this movie. It is gory and sick, but if you like that kind of thing, or your teenagers do, it is very funny, and wasn’t too bad when I watched through my fingers at the scary parts. It does actually have a very explicit moral.

is our largest congregation and is growing. Many of you may have heard of Bishop Carleton Pearson, who was an evangelical superstar. At the height of his career in the Pentecostal evangelical movement, he was converted to a Universalist understanding of Christianity. Pearson was kicked out of his denomination, began his own much smaller church, and then that too was going to fold. Marlin Lavanhar, the minister at the UU Church in Tulsa, had a collegial relationship with Pearson and invited him and his congregation to come worship at the Unitarian Universalist church. They used space at the church over a summer, but as their own congregation, and then Pearson decided that he would no longer keep that church as a separate entity. Some negotiations followed and many of Pearson's congregants have become part of the Tulsa UU church. They have all had adjustments to make, and you can read the article in the UU World if you want all the details, but what it came down to is this. The UU congregation had been looking for an opportunity to become a multicultural church. This opportunity presented itself, and now the congregation is experiencing a very different style of worship for one of their two services on Sundays. There are about 200 new members from Pearson's congregation that are now part of the Tulsa church, and there has been friction in some pockets of the congregation over the evangelical style of music and worship.

In the article Lavanhar said, "Our history is filled with people rejected for their religious beliefs. That is something we share with them. We're on this ship together. It's full of excitement and possibility and also danger and risk. By living out our covenant and statement of purpose, it has forced us to change. It's not forsaking Unitarian Universalism. It's being Unitarian Universalist."³ This is what I am getting at when I talk about being flexible. When we look at ideas like growth generally, and particularly growing our diversity, we must realize that this means that we will need to be flexible as a larger faith movement in thinking about how we do Unitarian Universalism. The fundamentals of our faith are about openness and caring and flexibility. To actually live this out will mean that the ways of worship, fellowship, and church organization that we have used since the beginning of our tradition may need to expand or change.

This service brings together themes from the first two sermons that I preached here at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire: openness to change and how we understand our unearned privilege. The privilege piece is this: Historically, much of diversity work has been to say, you are welcome to my church, but as my church is. You are welcome to join our committees, sing our hymns, and fellowship with us. However, to really engage with multiculturalism is to say, you are welcome to be a part of our church community, and to help shape its future. The majority of Unitarian Universalists have been the beneficiaries of unearned and unexamined privilege, which has blocked change and growth in our faith.

In the story of the Fox and the Bear⁴ we heard earlier you may remember that the man in the story lay down to wait for God's grace in order to survive. He was upset when he was not taken care of like the injured fox. God admonished him that he should rather be like the bear, and because he had the ability to take care of himself, to be an agent of God's care for others. I shared this story with you, because I think that it holds a kernel of our history with Unitarian Universalism's work in growing our diversity. We have often chosen a *Field of Dreams* sort of model where, if we build it, they will come. We have done work in our congregations to make ourselves more welcoming, and we have participated in national campaigns for advertising, including through past Association Sundays. But what it really comes down to is building relationship, families of choice, and making connections, even when it would seem the most

³ Marlin Lavanhar, "the gospel of inclusion", UU World, Fall 2009

⁴ "The Fox and the Bear", traditional story, collected in *100 Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, Margaret Silf, 2003

hard. We need the skills and the *chutzpah* to talk about our faith with others. If we are being fed by our congregations, if we are growing spiritually, if we are building the beloved community together, we need to get over our fear of talking about it with others. We need to go out there and share our story, to be the bear, to help others, and to not lie down and wait for people to join us, no matter how amazing our congregations are.

In our reading this evening Audre Lourde said, “I realize that if I wait until I am no longer afraid to act, write, speak, *be*, I’ll be sending messages on a Ouija board, cryptic complaints from the other side. When I dare to be powerful, *to use my strength in the service of my vision*, then it becomes less important whether or not I am afraid.” It is natural for us to be wary of sharing our faith stories with others. We worry about offending them, about coming on too strong, or being like those Christian evangelicals that make many of us uncomfortable. But here is the thing. When we speak from our experience, share our own stories, and offer a welcome to others to be part of our vision, we are offering genuine human connection and hope. Why should we keep it a secret?

Carleton Pearson’s Universalist congregation ended up as part of the UU church in Tulsa, and not with another Christian denomination, because of relationship. The minister in Tulsa built a relationship with a colleague who had previously been on the other side of many theological debates in their city, and *that* is why they moved to join the UU church, rather than another. Growing our diversity is about relationship building and flexibility.

So what does this mean for *this* congregation? Through the search process, I learned that many of, if not most of, the members of this congregation are interested in growth. What we are going to be working on this fall and into the spring is what exactly this means. What kind of growth do we want? How much? Who do we want to invite to be a part of our community? How flexible are we willing to be? Are we open to changes in worship, fellowship, or church life? The church board and I will be on a retreat at the end of the month with Lynn Thomas from the Clara Barton District to help us sort out ways to work on these kinds of questions with the congregation. I am opening up some questions here, because I invite you to start thinking about growth and change and flexibility now.

A gift of Unitarian Universalism is our wide theological tent, because it offers a theological home for a variety of people. It is also our challenge, because it puts the responsibility on all of us to do the internal work to be able to articulate our theology. We are called to be able to put our understanding of the meaning of life and love into words, or song, or art, or movement. It requires us to hone our tools of communication so that we can make meaning in community together. It can be scary to talk about our inner spiritual lives with others, but I believe this is an important part of our growth as human beings. Once we are able to share and communicate our vision as individuals and as a community, then we are able to invite others to be a part of it. I believe that a great gift of this congregation is that since you have built this community so recently in church years, it has not been long since you have done this work as a community. However, it will be my job as your minister and the church leadership’s job in this year of transition, to keep this conversation going. Who are we? What is our vision? Who do we want to be? How do we invite others to join us?

We don’t need to hold on to our fear. We can be the bear, and we can share what has been so spiritually nourishing for us, that we have built a community to celebrate and worship about it. Unitarian Universalism has been an amazing gift of acceptance and hope for so many people. Why should we keep it a secret? May we foster a community that is open and flexible enough to welcome the stranger, as we ourselves were once welcomed.

Amen?