

Yes, All Are Welcome
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from "All About Love: New Visions" by bell hooks;

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.

from "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman

I am of the old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine.
One of the great nations, the nation of many nations – the smallest the same
and the largest the same,
A southerner as soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable,
A Yankee bound my own way....ready for trade.... my joints the limberest joints
on earth and the sternest joints on earth,
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deer-skin leggings,
A boatman over the lakes or bays or along coasts....a Hoosier, a Badger,
a Buckeye,
A Louisianian or Georgian, a poke-easy from sandhills and pines,
At home on Canadian snowshoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen
off Newfoundland,
At home in the fleet of iceboats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine or the Texan ranch,
Comrade of Californians....comrade of free northwesterners, loving their
big proportions,
Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen – comrade of all who shake hands
and welcome to drink and meat;
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,
A novice beginning experient of myriads of seasons,

Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,
Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia....
a wandering savage,
A farmer, mechanic, or artist...a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker,
A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest.

I resist anything better than my own diversity,
And breathe the air and leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

Sermon

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 – 200 years ago.

In 1855 he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which for most of the rest of his life he continued to expand and edit. But the first edition stands on its own as one of the great works of American literature. It was of the first edition that Emerson wrote to Whitman (after receiving an unsolicited copy from this at the time unknown poet from Brooklyn, New York) words that Whitman printed without permission on the second edition, including:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of “Leaves of Grass.” I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed...
I greet you at the beginning of a great career which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.

The story of Whitman and Emerson’s ensuing sometimes warm, sometimes cool friendship is for another time. The point here is that Emerson saw in Whitman something new and somehow quintessentially American in spirit, this at a time when Americans were still trying to figure out what it meant to be an American – as perhaps we still are to this day.

It was also a time of even greater contentiousness and division in the nation than now – far more actually, as north and south stumbled their way toward the unutterable tragedy of the Civil War.

In short, it was into such a time that Whitman brought his poetry of remarkably inclusive spirit, sounding what he called (near the end of the first long poem of “Leaves of Grass”) his “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”

As we heard, styling himself a comrade...

Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,
Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or
Asia.... a wandering savage,
A farmer, mechanic, or artist...a gentleman, sailor,
lover or quaker,
A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest.

Now, Whitman was neither a Unitarian or a Universalist. If anything, he was more influenced by the Quakers. But in spirit he might as well have been a Universalist. For it is largely from that side of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition that we inherit the inclusive welcoming spirit that we strive, however imperfectly, to manifest. Yes, all are welcome.

You see, it was the early Universalists who affirmed that a loving God (and they believed that God was a loving God) would not condemn any of his children to eternal torment after death, however sinfully they lived: Universal salvation. These Universalists did have differences among themselves as to how this might work, given that there were those in the world who did not seem to suffer much for their evil ways in this life; but their affirmation stood, that one way or another all would eventually be welcomed into the arms of a loving God.

These days we Unitarian Universalists have a variety of beliefs about what comes next after we die, if anything at all comes next, or if we think much about it. But we do, as I've already suggested and as inspired by those early Universalists, strive as best we can to manifest a welcoming spirit in *this* life, in our congregations and in the rest of our lives, from personal to political. It is a spirit woven into most of our UU seven Principles, which affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person... justice, equity, and compassion... acceptance of one another... the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all... respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Yes, all are welcome, we say.

All of this more important than ever in such times as these in which we are living right now.

And all of this always easier said than done, as we ourselves have learned over the years in our own Old Ship congregation.

It took several years of hard work led by a dedicated Welcoming Congregation Committee leading educational forums and parish-wide conversations to get us to the point in the mid-1990s of voting to officially become a congregation welcoming to people regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

And we did not install ramps into our Meeting House or Parish House until about twenty or so years ago, in order to be genuinely welcoming to people in wheelchairs.

And as a congregation admittedly populated by many of politically liberal persuasion, we have to work hard to be sure we are welcoming to those of varied political perspectives.

All of this and more in the spirit of words from one of my colleagues, who I've often quoted as saying that in our congregations "you are welcome here.... as long as you are willing to leave the door open for the next person."

Again... often easier said than done.

Whitman himself, a man of deepest sympathies for every sort of human being, wrote at some point that yes of course slaves should be freed, but should probably use

their freedom to return to Africa, since it was clear that America was best ruled by white people.

Appalling as that sounds to us today, I found it interesting to hear a young African American poet on the radio the other day affirming the deep influence Whitman has had on him and on his poetry; and noting that the views I've just mentioned, appalling and racist as they are to us today, simply marked Whitman as a man of his time, a man who even so was in most ways, including in that spirit of radical inclusiveness, ahead of his time.

Which might lead us to wonder: In what ways are we today not as welcoming as we believe or would like to think of ourselves to be? What are our blind-spots? Who aren't we seeing and accepting in their fullness? *Are* we truly welcoming to everyone regardless of sexual or gender identity? Truly welcoming of people of varied intellectual and/or physical abilities? Truly welcoming to at least respectfully hear out those with political perspectives other than our own? How welcoming would we be or should we be of those with criminal records, whatever the crime?

I have no answers today, rather I offer this invitation for us to consider such questions. An invitation grounded, as I've said, in our Unitarian Universalist principles, printed and affirmed by us. But grounded even more fundamentally in a spiritual understanding and experience of who we are as human beings.

And who *do* we think we are?

Just individuals out to get as much out of life as we can, whatever we might think that "much" is?

Or part and parcel of one another, this larger life we share?

Jesus affirmed we are all children of God.

The indigenous peoples of this land affirmed very much the same.

Hindus say we are individual manifestations of the one divine reality.

And so on, as you've heard me preach over and over again.

But what *is* your experience, our experience of who we are?

Well, if we resonate, for example, to the Sufi poet Rumi's oft-quoted lines:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

If we resonate to such lines, it seems to me it says something, says much, about who we really think we are. Doesn't it?

The Native American Muskokee poet Joy Harjo writes this, her poem "This Morning I Pray for My Enemies":

And whom do I call my enemy?
An enemy must be worthy of engagement.
I turn in the direction of the sun and keep walking.
It's the heart that asks the question, not my furious mind.
The heart is the smaller cousin of the sun.
It sees and knows everything.
It hears the gnashing even as it hears the blessing.
The door to the mind should only open from the heart.
An enemy who gets in, risks the danger of becoming a friend.

So, if we resonate to this, the heart's knowing transforming enemy into friend, what does this say about who we truly know ourselves to be? What does it say about how we would, from our best and deepest selves, want to be with and among others... how welcoming we really know we should be?

And the writer bell hooks, in the reading we heard earlier, invites us to live lives based on what she calls a "love ethic." She wrote that this requires courage (a word rooted in heart), the courage to come face to face with our fears, including, implicitly, fear of the "other," fear of anyone who looks or is different from us in whatever way. And so, love not only as a noun, this beautiful feeling of being in love as we put it, but more fundamentally love as a verb, love manifest in what we do, how we treat one another, how we are with one another.

With all this in mind and heart, do we move toward those who look or seem different from us? Or away? Do we speak up for those who are being threatened or oppressed by the powers that be – these days transgender people whose rights are being dramatically curtailed by the current administration, women whose freedoms are being curtailed by one state after another, immigrants seeking asylum whose families are separated, who are being denied prompt hearings... and so on.

Yes, we are, it's pretty clear, still figuring out what it means to be an American, what it means to be true to those profoundly welcoming words engraved on the Statue of Liberty.

My first reading of that first edition of "Leaves of Grass" was almost half a century ago, when a fellow camp counselor, just a couple of years my senior, thrust it into my hands and said I must read it.

I don't know if it changed my life, but it surely became part of my life, as words can do. Words which can evoke truths we perhaps only half-realized, as for some of you maybe Whitman or Rumi or Joy Harjo or bell hooks have done today.

I'll draw to an end this morning by noting that sometimes the courage to be more welcoming can manifest in very simple ways.

For example - as I've noted on other occasions:

At Fellowship Hour – or at any gathering for that matter – but at Fellowship Hour we can easily fall into conversation with friends or other members of Old Ship who we know well and with whom we are comfortable. And that’s a beautiful thing.

Even more beautiful is a simple gesture in the midst of such a conversation with one or two others. The gesture is a stepping back, opening with an arm, to welcome in someone who is not yet part of that small circle of conversation, someone you don’t already know very well or maybe have never even yet met.

What a deeply lovely gesture that opening is, an opening of the hand that is an opening of heart (smaller cousin of the illuminating sun)... an opening which is a welcome to that field beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing... an opening to who we know we, each of us in that circle, truly are.

Because, after all, as Walt Whitman said in the midst of “Leaves of Grass”:

... whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to
his own funeral, dressed in his shroud,...

For at the very outset of the poem:

...what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

So it is. So it will always be.