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Are we Truly a Welcoming Congregation?

This morning, we welcome new members into our Fellowship, joyfully! And as we do so, it is good to consider the ways we welcome newcomers who come to check us out. Do we offer visitors a truly welcoming presence?

Several weeks ago, I attended a workshop for UU ministers on congregational dynamics and transformation. We were asked to bring a problem for discussion, a problem we thought might require some sort of cultural shift within our congregation. I chose to look at the difficulties we have had in attracting younger families with children to participate with us in building this community. And that's pretty much the way I framed the issue: "How can we attract more families with children?" As a fellowship, we know that our core is weighted toward those who are older; many of us are retirees (and indeed your minister is beyond the usual retirement age himself!) So we tend to look at the problem this way: we are getting older as a congregation, and unless we begin to bring in younger families, eventually we will die out. So basically what we are thinking is that we need younger families in order to survive. And when we look at the issue this way, what do we tend to do? We look at it as a problem to be solved. If only we had the right space for children; if only we advertised better and in the right place; if only we offered the right curriculum; and so on.

At the workshop, we were asked to begin from a different perspective. We were asked to think of our vision for our congregation. What would our ideal congregation look like? What kind of fellowship do we want to be? So I did that, and that visioning process brought me to a different way of framing the issue. This morning, I'd like to share that with you. I invite us to think together about our vision for this Fellowship. For the moment, never mind how we get there. Let's use our imaginations for a while and think of the community that we aspire to be.

I envision a fellowship that includes a broad cross-section of our larger community. There would be children of pre-school age and of elementary school age. They would look forward to coming here on Sunday mornings because they would have friends here. They would share learning activities; they would have fun together, and they would have time for play. There would be youth and teenagers, who would also look forward to being here with their friends. Eventually, in some not too distant future, they would be able to have their own special space, where they could be together with their friends and they could plan their own activities.

And we would be able to offer our children, our youth, and yes, our adults as well, opportunities for growth and development. For example, our UU OWL program could enable people of all ages to develop and to maintain a healthy view of their own sexuality. OWL stands for "Our Whole Lives." It's an outstanding program on human sexuality that was developed jointly by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UCC – United Church of Christ. This is just one of many valuable opportunities we might offer that younger families would not find anywhere else.

Young families would look forward to coming here, because they would find here a place of mutual support.. And, of course, this would include families of many different

configurations. Families, for example, headed by a single parent, and families might have two moms or two dads; families with children from previous marriages blended together into new family units; families in which grandparents are taking on a major role in the parenting, and so on. And all these different kinds of families would be supported and cared for by this fellowship. Here, they would find a place where they could share the problems – and the joys – of raising children and youth in the 21st Century. So the parents would also look at this as a place where they could be with their friends.

In this community I'm envisioning, those of us who are older and have been through our child-rearing years, would enjoy the presence of younger families, of non-traditional families, of children and youth. And we would interact together, sharing our stories, sharing our spiritual growth and development. We would host events that included all ages – maybe working together on social justice or environmental projects, or making music together, or telling each other stories. In short, we would truly be a multi-generational community.

But that wouldn't be all. So far, I have been talking about families, especially families with children. But we need to remember that many of us are not in families. My ideal community would also contain young adults – people of college age, people in their 20s and 30s, whether partnered or single. And these young adults would also find nurturing and support within this community. They would have other young adults to connect with, and they would also be welcomed by the entire fellowship for the gifts they bring to us.

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Every UU congregation I have been connected with has had a strong contingent of local Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and transgender people. And these congregations have been enriched immeasurably by this GLBT presence. My ideal fellowship would include gays and lesbians, and bisexual and transgender people; they would feel welcomed, nourished, supported within this community. And the community would be strengthened by their presence among us. Our denomination has produced a wonderful curriculum called "Welcoming Congregation," that enables congregations to learn about the LGBT community and its concerns. The curriculum has helped many congregations to become places of safety and community for our GLBT brothers and sisters.

Would our ideal community contain a wide range of political beliefs? Of course it would. But this question, in my view, puts us on slippery ground. I don't know the political affiliations, if any, of most people in this congregation, and I don't want to know. To me, that seems like the wrong question. Some have suggested that they wish that Republicans could feel comfortable here, and of course, we want to welcome people of diverse political perspectives. At the same time, however, we need to remember that we hold certain ideas and principles as part of our faith and our movement. For most, if not all, of us, these include a commitment to peace and nonviolence; a concern for the billions of people throughout this country and the world who are living in poverty and poor health; and a commitment to work to live sustainably on our one and only planet home. Are we willing to compromise those ideals to attract new members? For example, is attracting members worth equivocating about a preemptive war that UUs and people of many other faith traditions oppose? Don't all faith traditions teach us that killing and violence are wrong? You can see the problem here. As people of faith, we need to articulate a prophetic vision based on our core principles. If we water down our

message to attract any given group, then what have we become? Do we stand for anything, or has our message become a kind of pabulum simply designed to appeal to the widest number of people? And then, ultimately, do we really appeal to anybody? I don't know the answer to this dilemma, but I want to be clear that I see it as a problem without easy answers. How do we balance the prophetic voice of our faith with our desire to attract people of different beliefs?

My ideal fellowship would also, of course, include people of all races and ethnicities. The question of racial inclusiveness in UU congregations is a huge subject all by itself. Of course, we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday, and we condemn racism. But as we look around our entire denomination, it does not have a lot of racial diversity. And for us here, the larger Mother Lode community is simply not very diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Nonetheless, in my vision of our community, we would look around on Sunday morning and see many different faces of humanity.

My vision of our ideal community would also include working-class people, people with everyday, grinding concerns about keeping their jobs, supporting their families and so forth. If we look around on any given Sunday, we realize that we tend to be people who occupy a pretty privileged position – we tend to be highly educated; we tend to be people who have been able to work at jobs that challenge and fulfill us, not just jobs that we need to have in order to survive. You may remember an article in the UU World a year or so ago that discussed the issue of class as it relates to our congregations. The author wrote about his father, a lifelong factory worker and a conservative Lutheran. If his father were to come to a UU congregation, the author asked, would he be able to find someone to talk with? Does Unitarian Universalism speak about the lives of all people or just about lives in the professional class? In my ideal fellowship, we would find ways to speak to the concerns of working-class people, of lower-income people, and we would develop a comfort level with each other. And working-class people would also find nurturance and support, would feel part of a welcoming, caring community. We wouldn't pretend to be blind to class differences, but we would realize that this kind of diversity makes our community richer and more interesting for everyone in it.

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So those are some of the things that came to me as I created my vision for our fellowship. The process opened my eyes in some really important ways, and obviously I have taken it far beyond the problem of attracting more children.

I want to be clear here that my vision is not a criticism of our present or our past. Most emphatically not! Many people have put their time, their energy, their treasure, into creating and building this community. And we should be proud of how far we have come. In creating a vision of where we would like to be, I don't intend to criticize where we have been or where we are now. What I learned from the workshop, however, is that we need a vision of what we want to become to enable ourselves to before we can figure out how to get there.

So, what did I learn from this visioning process? Well, in my opening, I mentioned that we tend to see attracting families with children as a matter of our long-term survival. Our mind-set is that we need children if we want to continue as a fellowship. What my visioning process taught me is that we need to reframe our stance. What I see in my vision is a joyful, celebratory community – a community in which we truly want to be

multigenerational; a community that sees itself as far richer when children and youth, and their parents, are playing an active role in our life together. So it's a matter of what we want to be as a congregation, not a matter of what we need to be. Imagine being a young family and hearing a subtle message that says – “please come, we need you so much!” And contrast that with a message that says we welcome you because we want to be a community that includes parents, children and teenagers; that we want to be a community that includes active and vibrant young adults. And we want to have a community in which people of all ages participate together in a wide range of multigenerational activities.

And that is where the need for a shift in our culture comes in. If we are to be truly, truly welcoming of people of all ages, we have to work together to develop a vision of the way we would like to be. We aren't there right now, and no blame attaches to that. We are a vibrant, growing community, and we need to celebrate that. But, at the same time, we could begin to re-imagine ourselves as a community that really wants to include people of all ages.

And the same really goes for the other groups of people that I would include in my vision of how I want us to be. We hold ourselves to be a community that includes a wide range of beliefs and values -- both theological and political. I think we're pretty good at making a place for many different religious and spiritual beliefs. If we want to attract people who are more conservative politically, then we need to make that part of our vision, too. I've told you my doubts about that one; but if this community truly wants to do that, it needs to build a vision of that sort of community.

If we want the GLBT community to join together with us, we need to have a vision of our community that truly wants and welcomes gay people. This shouldn't be so hard for us. We have long stood up for gay rights. It's not a big leap at all from there to conveying the message that we really want gay people to be part of our community. If we want to be a welcoming place for working-class and low-income people, we have to develop a vision of a community in which we speak to the gut-level issues that concern working people. If we want to be a community that feels like home to people of color, then we need to envision the type of community that speaks to their interests and their needs. And so on. All these things are possible. But, it seems to me that in order to become a community that includes all these groups, we have to be a community that wants to be inclusive. And to become that kind of multi-layered, multi-generational, multi-cultural kind of community, then we need to make a profound cultural shift. We need to take on the work of re-visioning our selves as a welcoming, inclusive community.

This is something we can do. All we need to do is to return over and over in our mind to the core principles that bring us together. As a people and a movement we are committed to showing compassion for all beings, to manifesting love in all our actions. What it takes is mindfulness of these essential truths, and intentionality about how we act in the world. We can be truly welcoming if we remain true to our values, and if we resolve that that is the way we truly want to be.

As we close, I invite us, each one of us, to hold in our minds and hearts our vision of the kind of welcoming community that we want for ourselves and for the world. Let us remember these words from the teachings of the Buddha:

The thought manifests as the word;

the word manifests as the deed;
the deed develops into habit;
and habit hardens into character.

So watch the thought and its ways with care,
and let it spring from love
born out of concern for all beings.