

Can We Be Welcoming?

February 24, 2008

Last Thursday evening, I sat around a table with 16 other people. We were quite a mix and it was absolutely fascinating. We were English Irish, Uruguayan, Puerto Rican, French Canadian, Nicaraguan, African American, Mexican, male, female, Gay, straight, Jamaican, Greek, young, elder, professional worker, unemployed, neighborhood dweller, brown, white, black, healthy, unhealthy, native English speakers, English as second language speakers, and I am sure more traits and characteristics that we didn't even touch on. Some of us were willing to share our stories about trying to be part of a welcoming community; some of us had new and or deep wounds and could not share. A very successful realtor told of how when a high end house is going on market the sellers do not want to deal with her- a Puerto Rican American. A student at a prestigious college said that she is still followed around the store because she has dark skin and she is young. One person who told us about his sexual preference told us about being spit on and taunted because of his choices, and whenever he is mentioned in his profession one of the first things noted is that he is a Gay man. One young man told about trying to speak English and not being heard because he still struggles with some words. One man spoke about death threats on him because of his work to confront systems of oppression. Some of us spoke about trying to be allies and being met with skepticism, by some groups, and hostility by other groups. But we gathered around a welcoming table, many of us speaking about having families that are multiethnic, multiracial, bilingual and wanting to bring our children and grandchildren into a world that reflects this reality. We all expressed a desire to be part of the change and a willingness to engage in the struggle. Obviously one of my passions and interests in our congregation is for it being as welcoming as it can

possibly be. I do know this is challenging too. So today I pose the question- Can we be welcoming?

However it is more than a simple yes/no it is a looking at some of the ways we are and some of the ways we might not be.

I want to give you a good for instance: Look at our order of service in the box labeled "This week in UU history. It says Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland Me. He taught at Bowdoin College and Harvard University. His work was admired at home and abroad, earning him honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge in England. I thought that the whole insert had been edited, I suggested changes, but I see that that is not so, and so using my anti-oppressive lens I want to analyze the whole insert. It is ripe with classism and nationalism and not at all welcoming. Prior to the first edit the insert just said Bowdoin and Harvard. Now a person not from here or a long New England background might not know that Bowdoin is a college in Maine and Harvard means Harvard University, not Harvard Mass, the city next over to us. And the sentence that was to be changed that got my goat and still does is "his work was admired at home and abroad." The assumption is that home is the United States and abroad is anywhere but the States and not home. What about the person who doesn't identify the United States as home? Isn't that an unwelcoming statement? I think so. Would not it have been more welcoming to say- his works, and how about naming some rather than the Classiest assumption that we all would know his works, was admired in the United States where he was born and also in European countries earning him an honorary degree from Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England.

What are some of his poems?

The Arrow and the Song.

I shot an arrow into the air it fell to earth, I knew not where; for so swiftly it flew, the sight could not follow it in its flight.... And Paul Revere's Ride are among his most famous poems.

How welcoming are we really if we don't think about words that we use. If I were to always use European writers, always reference family as mom, dad and child, always speak of love relationships only as husband and wife, always read from classic sources then we would not be welcoming, would we? Now can I refer to Euro/white writers of course I can, can I sing hymns written by Bach, Mozart, Handel, Wesley of course I can, can I read from the Bible, from Robert Frost, Wendell Berry, of course I can, can I speak about being proud to be an American of course I can. But, and you knew there would be one. I can also read from Langston Hughes, Maya Angelo, Martin Luther King Jr. Thich Nhat Hahn, Pablo Neruda, Black Elk, and the Dali Lama, I can sing a Native American melody, a Black spiritual, a Hebrew folk song, a Mexican dance song.

Can we be more welcoming? Of course we can, we can welcome straight, gay, family and single, well to do and not so, school educated and life educated, all ethnic and racial persons, able and not abled, all those who we might tend to think of as strangers.

Let me think aloud with you about the concept of the stranger and how I believe that at the core of welcoming is learning how to deal with the concept of the stranger. "In Hebrew, the root word for "stranger" is also the root word for "border" an article in the magazine Parabola wrote.¹ The article continues, "Whether it is an individual, a nation, or an alien philosophy, the stranger stands outside the borders of our perspective, on a dark plain beyond our range of vision." Now doesn't that get your attention? We live within borders and boundaries; these define our world, our perception, the place where we live, move and have our being. A

¹ Dweller on the Plain. Eliezer Shore Parabola: the Magazine of Myth and Tradition. May 1995.

stranger stands outside that border. We don't know them, perhaps we don't understand their language, clothes, culture, habits, and to get to know them is an emotional investment, an engagement with the unknown. I propose we cannot be welcoming until we are willing to admit a couple of things about us as individuals and about an institution. One, the stranger does exist and that the stranger will demand our attention. Two, that spiritual growth occurs as one is willing to venture out beyond one's own borders and boundaries, into unfamiliar terrain. Three that when we dare to see and be with the stranger we will learn a deeper truth about ourselves and the other from the encounter with the unknown. It is charged with emotion, it is risky to admit that there might be more truths, dreams, visions and ideals than we have imagined. It is risky to appear looking the fool when approaching "the stranger" asking to be informed. Is it worth it- oh yes?

Let me share this wonderful poem from Rumi

"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.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi Sufi poet 1207-1273

Eliezer Shore, in 'Dweller on the Plain' writes "there is a city of the mind, with uniform streets and secure borders, with rigid laws and strict legislation, whose like minded citizens share every goal and opinion. Beyond the city limits is a wasteland. On a barren plain where no one should live, the stranger dwells."² This is true of each one of our minds.

² Parabola p. 13

This is our great spiritual challenge and a path to spiritual growth too. It is necessary for us to understand that when we keep firm borders we do not allow for new paths to be built in our mind, in our hearts, in our homes, in our cities, in our beloved community.

When we sat at the table last week with our various and assorted life experiences, we were a little apprehensive of the stranger next to us. When we dared to speak we found not the simplistic answer- we are all alike therefore we should learn to love one another, but instead I heard- “it is hard work to come together and to be welcoming, I have been hurt, I am afraid, I am not sure, but I want to honor you, I want you to honor me, I am willing to come into relationship with you so that together we can affirm and promote justice, equity and harmonious social relationships” . I heard willingness to engage with the stranger. Together we will lie in the field our souls will meet and the phrase each other will not make sense; our desire to be united will. That is welcoming, can we be that community? I trust we can.