

Am I Welcome Here, Just as I Am?

Reflection by Rev. Meg Roberts

Delivered at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver

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Reading - *Handwoven (a newcomer poem)* by Liz James (Unitarian from Saskatoon),
(printed in the [Canadian Unitarian](#), Summer 2003)

because our faith cannot be found
in any book, or any temple
held deep, it is most visible
in the spaces between us
when our hands touch in greeting
when our voices interweave
so much a part of daily living
we forget there are people
who had never imagined
this is possible
who sit in the corner of a service
with eyes filled with tears
and dream of belonging here
what a tragedy
if even one melts away
unwelcomed, only because
we could not hear their dreams

Reflection – *Am I Welcome Here, Just as I Am?*

When you first came to a Unitarian community, what was it like?

Did you feel welcome?

If so, what helped you feel welcome?

If not, what do you wish would have happened instead?

As Unitarians in Canada, our vision is to be radically inclusive: to create hospitable, diverse, multi-generational communities, including our various social identities. This congregation's website says,

“Our congregation welcomes all ages, orientations, abilities, and identities in our joyous search for meaning.”

In one Unitarian Universalist resource packet on Identity I found this:

In a sense, every UU congregation hangs two signs on their front doors:

One that reads: “**Hidden Parts Allowed in the Open!**”

And another that says: “**Contradictions Welcome!**”

This is what we aspire to. For some of us, this is how it feels. With others, not so much. What can we learn about being more welcoming?

When I think of being inclusive, it means finding concrete ways of acting on two of our Unitarian principles:

- recognizing each person's inherent worth and dignity
- creating justice, equity and compassion in how we relate to one another

It is easier to feel accepted for who we are where there are people like us---we fit the “norm.”

Norms are: Guidelines (informal or formal) about what a group considers normal. They form the basis for collective expectations (consciously or unconsciously). If someone says, “It's the way we do things around here,” it is likely a norm.

I've led congregational workshops where we talked about what some “norms” might be for that congregation. A conscious norm in Unitarian congregations generally might be “we wear name tags at services and events”; or “we offer refreshments at gatherings (tea/coffee/snacks).” An unconscious norm I've witnessed in various Unitarian congregations might be “we leave talking to newcomers to the greeters or membership committee's welcomers” – don't know if that applies here or not. Another one I've heard from various Unitarians: “we don't talk about how much money we give to the congregation.” Funny about that: Unitarians can talk about religion, politics and sex education, but often I've found people aren't comfortable talking about money! But that's a topic for another service....

In some religious communities, being vocal and moving around during a service is normal – “Amen!” is understood as encouraging the preacher. For others, it is normal to sit quietly and listen attentively, making eye contact. For some cultures and communities, maintaining steady eye contact is considered rude.

So, what if we are not part of what society or a community like the Unitarians considers ‘normal’? How does even the concept of ‘normal’ affect our ability to be radically inclusive? There are so many natural diverse variations in human beings. And it makes a difference whether we come from the dominant culture or from a minority part, or a marginalized group. Our Unitarian desire to be radically inclusive is historical: amidst the Christian Reformation in Europe in the 1500s, people were killing each other based on what they believed; so, Unitarians decided not to have a creed of beliefs that would exclude people, but instead we would affirm each person’s right to decide for themselves and have values be our common ground.

In the 1700s, when many other Christians believed God would choose who would go to heaven or hell, our spiritual ancestors, the Universalists, believed that not just some people were saved from hell, but all were saved---universal salvation. For many of us now---who draw on various sources for our spiritual and philosophical beliefs---hell and heaven is what we create here on earth while we are alive.

Unitarians have been involved in human rights and inclusion all along their history: speaking out against enslavement; the civil rights movement; the women’s liberation movement; and for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people’s rights. This congregation went through a process to learn more about the natural variation in sexual and affectional orientation back in 1995 – the second Unitarian congregation in Canada to have the official designation of a Welcoming Congregation- to learn to be more inclusive. It was active in the process of advocating for same-sex marriage. I know that many Unitarian congregations have sponsored refugees, especially in the past few years – this congregation has a long history of doing so, which I find inspiring. At this time in our world, people are being deported from countries because of their religion or because of the country they come from; when there is a world-wide refugee crisis (some from political events and more from the ecological crisis from global warming). Even in the news last night, I heard a report on CBC radio about the group of migrants rescued from human traffickers’ unseaworthy boats in the Mediterranean – who were not all allowed to come ashore in Italy. (I’m glad there was some developments so that minors and some who were ill were allowed to come ashore – and late last night I read that others would be taken by the Catholic church in Italy and others in Albania.) When we see the world as “us” and “them”, we can’t move forward. How do we carry on the traditions of our Unitarian spiritual ancestors in learning to be more inclusive of human diversity, to offer a place where people feel welcome just as they are?

I think one step is by knowing who you are and where you come from. For those of us who come from the dominant culture, what is considered “normal” is like the water I swim in: I don’t even see it. For those who are in a minority group, they are very aware of the differences between their life experiences and the way the majority functions.

Imagine that culture is like an iceberg: there are things you see above the water line that are more obvious, like art, language, music, rituals, greetings, food, dress (and others). These we often see lifted up when there are festivals celebrating various cultures all over Canada each year. Some aspects of culture are less obvious (that are hidden under the water line): like the way we relate, concepts of justice, decision-making models, who holds power and how it is used; how emotions are handled, concepts of time, respect for authority, status--- and how all these arise from how we understand the world and why we are here---that comes from the philosophy or religious or spiritual traditions we were raised (even if it is from a secular background).

I know that as a Canadian Unitarian, when talking to my American colleagues who come up to serve congregations here there are two key things I tell them:

- Silence does not mean assent. In many places they have come from, people are more direct in saying when they disagree with something. For many in Canada in the dominant culture, we just go silent. Conflict styles vary from group to group, family to family, person to person, and it is still something that is useful. (How many people know what I’m talking about?)
- We try to be accepting and tolerant of people from various parts of the world----we want to be a cultural mosaic, and aspire to intolerant of intolerance---but one blind spot is that Canadians can criticize Americans thinking that somehow it is OK because they are our big cousins to the south, and people say things about Americans that they would never say about people from other countries. (I understand: talking about what one person says or does, can and should be called to account what it isn’t respectful or just, but I’ve learned to be careful about generalizing.) I have an American grandfather, so I try to call it when I hear it.

A question for you: how do you identify?

There are various aspects to our social identities:

Ancestry and culture

Gender orientation and affectional orientation

Our Age – and our abilities (including how those are affected by our health – physical and mental)

What we believe in – our theology or philosophy, our political views

Our socio-economic status – class, employment status, education, income and assets
Our family structure- If we're married, partnered, single; if we have children; a nuclear family or an extended family

In learning as part of the Canadian Unitarian Council's *Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Reflection* Guide team (which I have the privilege of being co-chair), Marlene Blake Seale showed us a chart she created in collaboration with the Diversity Working Group at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto that is about social identities (I have a few copies, see me afterwards if you would like one) – it goes into the social identities in more detail.¹ It is work spending some time to consider what social identities do you use to describe yourself? Which ones would you be more comfortable telling others about (having in the foreground), and which others may be ones you keep in the background. Consider how that may be for others as well.

I come from the dominant cultures in that I'm white, middle-class, cisgender, and straight, so I'm learning to actually see the water I swim in – and that it's not the only water out there! Because I've experienced depression in my life, I also know what it is like to have identities I have hid out of fear of people making assumptions about me.

I'm learning to allow people to share their social identities with me as they are ready and willing (and not assume that one identity defines them – but get to know what it means to them). Like not being defined by being a perfectionist! Or not defining someone because of a disability. I'm learning more about cultures that are different from mine and noticing how I respond when there are differences and when there are similarities.

Wade Davis is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and author whose work has focused on worldwide indigenous cultures.² He says this: "The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit."

Years ago, I invited a friend of mine to a Unitarian service. After the service, we stood up and the woman sitting next to my friend greeted her, and then said, "Where are you from?" My friend said, "Montreal." Then the white woman said, "But, where are you originally from?" My friend is a woman of colour. I was shocked and didn't know what to say. Afterwards, as we were walking away from the church, I apologized to my friend and said I wished I'd known what to do. My friend said that if that were to happen again when we were together, she said, "you can identify where you come from and ask the other person where they come from." It was one of those awakening moments for me.

In the process of Theatre for Living's developing the play, *šxʷ?amət (home)*, as part of the cast I learned more about the ongoing colonization that exists on this land – and I continue to learn more. This past May, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada as part of our professional development, watched and discussed the TEDTalk, "Pedagogy of the Decolonizing" by Quetzala Carson.³ She says, "Panic is not prayerful" and encourages us to approach things in peaceful and loving ways. She speaks on the challenging nature of the dialogue surrounding colonial violence; colonial violence is difficult to engage, because it often involves dialogues on questioning narratives that we've known to be normal. Quetzala explains the tenets of colonialism, how our normative narratives are built, and also shares some strategies on how to engage and combat colonial violence with compassion.

She offers these five ways to combat colonial violence:

Do nothing, and be the best you can be – It is not always safe to call someone out if someone has a position of power. So we have to position ourselves, asking ourselves, "where am I in position of power (oppressor/oppressed)."

Call someone out – You have to be really careful (if we see the violences) – we call someone out in a loving, kind way, how to do it in a good way. You can say: This is what you did, this is how it made me feel, this is why it is problematic, this is where it is systematic – then you ask their response; what do you think, where are we now, how do we move forward together.

Call someone in – Build relationship based on what you're sharing with them, saying, this is what I've learned.

Ask for time – If you are not sure how to respond, ask for time- whether you are being called out or whether you are calling someone out; so you can come back in the best way possible.

Bringing it home – Bring it with you: how can you learn from it and what can you share from that.

I still have lots to learn about how to be more welcoming. Here are just a few practical things I'm trying to practice:

- Check my assumptions, if I assume something about someone's social identity. Remember that each person is unique. Get to know them in their own right.
- When I meet someone at a congregation that I don't know, I don't assume they are new (just because I've not met them before). Instead, I may ask "What's your connection to

this community?” Then they can tell me if they’re there for the first time or been coming here for 26 years!

- I volunteer that I use the pronouns “she, her, and hers” (sometimes I write it on my name tag, under my name, or include them in introducing myself). I’m learning more about how not to assume there is just the binary of male-identified people and female-identified; someone may identify as queer, or out of the box, they are many ways of self-identifying. Some people prefer to be referred to as “they and theirs” for example. Not sure what to do? Offer your pronouns and try asking: “What pronouns do you use?” or “Can you remind me what pronouns you use?” “It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as making a hurtful assumption.”⁴
- When I was on the play tour this past winter about what reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people looks like on the ground, I learned many things – that could be another service in itself! One thing I remember someone saying to me, that in her culture, some people don’t shake hands – and those who do, do it lightly – same with hugs. Of course, things vary from nation to nation. An Aboriginal elder had said to her, “Why do they want to squeeze the life out of me!”
- When I’m talking to youth, I don’t just ask them about school and I don’t assume they are going on to university – there is a broad interest in trades, in getting life experience, in following other paths. I find out their interests and share some of your own. Creating connection isn’t one sided.
- Thanks to some funding from this congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada and the Canadian Unitarian Council, a Young Adult Welcoming project was created where congregations who signed up were mentored in how to become more welcoming. In the survey they did, “Several [young adult] respondents said that people did not talk to them before or after the service when they first visited their congregation; this isolation can cause hurt, confusion, and disillusionment.” Young adults appreciate being welcomed as individuals with unique skills, needs, and interests; comments like “we need more young people like you” or “we need a young person’s perspective on this committee” as well as expectations that a young adult can speak for all young adults, are counterproductive in welcoming and integrating young adults. If you want to learn some tips about how to be welcoming of young adults, this congregation has put up their “Coffee Hour Caution” poster on the bulletin board as you go into Hewett Centre. Have a look. Try out a couple in the next month.
- Maybe in coffee hour, talk to someone new. Not because they are different – or similar – but because they are human, like you, with complex and diverse social identities. Getting to know one another takes time, and it won’t happen if we don’t take the first step and learn as we go, taking responsibility for our own learning – not expecting others to teach us necessarily.

I'd love to hear from you after the service about something you've learned about how to be more welcoming because I'm learning along with you!

As we begin to prepare for this new congregational program year, may we carry on the tradition of our Unitarian spiritual ancestors and open our minds so that we too can see the gifts of those around us, whatever their diversity, and may we open our hearts, so we can be truly welcoming of those whose paths cross with ours. May it be so. Amen.

SOCIAL IDENTITIES

ANCESTRY & CULTURE:	Ethnicity, race, shade, national origin, language, name pronunciation
GENDER IDENTIFICATION & SEXUAL ORIENTATION:	Assigned gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, marital status
AGE:	Child, youth, young adult, adult, elderly
ABILITY & ACCESSIBILITY:	Mental health, physical health and physical access, mobility, sight, hearing, cognition, technology
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS:	Class, employment status, income, assets, education, access to resources and opportunities, social networks, incarceration status
THEOLOGY:	Humanism, agnosticism, atheism, paganism, indigenous, polytheism, monotheism, mysticism
FAMILY STRUCTURE:	Nuclear, extended, polyamorous, single, single-parenting, step-parents, fostering, adoption, heterosexual, lesbian/gay, guardianship
POLITICAL/IDEOLOGICAL:	Political beliefs, voting practices, personal philosophies, life choices

Collaboration of: Marlene Blake Seale and the Diversity Working Group @ First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. August 2013, revised June 2016.

¹ A copy of the Social Identities chart has been included at the end of the print version of this reflection.

² He is “a [Canadian anthropologist](#) and... author... whose work has focused on worldwide indigenous cultures, especially in North and South America; he is a Professor of Anthropology and the BC Leadership Chair in Cultures and Ecosystems at Risk at the [University of British Columbia](#). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wade_Davis_\(anthropologist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wade_Davis_(anthropologist))

³ “Pedagogy of the Decolonizing” by Quetzala Carson, at TEDxUAlberta: <https://youtu.be/IN17Os8JAr8>
Quetzala Carson is Mestizx from Mana ahuac, Nicaragua.

⁴ University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>