

Longing to Belong

A Service by Laurie Stuart
South Nassau UU Congregation
October 12, 2014

CALL TO WORSHIP

As surely as we belong to the universe
we belong together.
We join here to transcend the isolated self,
To reconnect,
To know ourselves to be at home,
Here on earth, under the stars,
Linked with each other.

Margaret A. Keip

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MOMENT

Yesterday was National Coming Out Day. It's a day, set aside 26 years ago, to celebrate coming out as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) or as an ally or a friend of the LGBTQ community. Coming out is important because it reminds us that we are all unique loving individuals and that we all deserve to be treated fairly and respectfully and equally under the law. It challenges the idea that boys only love girls and girls only love boys. It challenges that boys are boys and girls are girls. It challenges the whole notion of a stationary gender identity and it makes room for all of us to be more fully who we are. On Friday, the Interweave group showed the movie "Puzzles, When Hate Came to Town." It's a story about a teenager who entered a gay bar and attacked the people there and how the town responded by creating programs so that children could learn how to get along with people who are different from them. The hope of Coming Out Day is that when we share the stories of LGBTQ people, we create more love and justice in the world. Selina is going to tell you her coming out story.

"I remember when I was five. My mother bought me jump ropes and jacks and plastic tea sets and baby dolls that never had enough hair. What I really wanted was a bag full of green army men and a police car with a siren and flashing lights.

"I used to sit outside with the other girls from my building when I was nine. We looked at magazines full of women in white wedding dresses. They fantasized about who they would marry when they grew up. Everyone wanted to be Mrs. Michael Jackson. I said that I wanted to marry him too. But I never even really wanted a wedding dress.

"When I was fifteen, Darryl Hooper liked me. Whenever I went to my locker, he was already there. He walked me to class and carried my books and brought me bag lunches of thickly sliced bologna sandwiches with mustard. I suppose he was my boyfriend even though I didn't like him that way. He asked me to the prom and, of course, I went; that's what all girls want, right? And anyway, his sister was one of my best friends. I couldn't say no.

“I told my mother when I was twenty-one that I never wanted to get married. She told me I was too young anyway and I shouldn’t worry about it. But she didn’t understand. How could she? I didn’t. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin.

“When I was twenty-three, somebody said that there was nothing wrong with me. There was a place where I fit in. There was a place where I belonged. And I didn’t need Prince Charming to whisk me away so that I could have my Happily Ever After.

“I came out to all my friends later that summer. They laughed, warm-heartedly, and told me they already knew. I wish that I had known, when I was five.

READING:

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been
—a place, half remembered, a place we catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us,
eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us

whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins our strength to
do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing. A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

- Starhawk

SERMON: Longing to Belong

It has been long documented that human beings are tribal people and that we have an inherent need for belonging. In 1943, humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow created a hierarchy of needs, in which he placed belonging directly in the middle of physical needs, such as food and shelter, and growth needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization. This hierarchy suggests that higher needs come into focus only when lower, more basic needs are met. And while there are recent studies that suggest that the hierarchical structure has flaws, in that people with no food and shelter still have needs for self-esteem, self-actualization and belonging, Maslow’s work points to the fact that when we feel like we belong, we have a greater capacity for acceptance, realism, solving problems outside ourselves, spontaneity, autonomy, and gratitude.

We have an increasing capacity to become the most that we can become.

Which is to say that when the fundamental longing to belong is actualized, there are real advantages to ourselves, our organizations and the world outside of our doors, especially at this time when we are moving beyond the limitations of the modern age. As we are moving into a constructive post modern era. (I’m happy to talk to you more about that, at another time.)

So where does our sense of belonging come from? Do we create it or do we expect others to create a culture that helps us feel that we belong.

To that I say it's both both/and. The sense of belonging comes from within us and it is nurtured from without.

Last year, while serving Quimper UU Fellowship, I had the honor and delight to attend the Pacific Northwest UU Ministers Association's Professional Days.

I was excited to go. I had heard that this chapter was amazingly welcoming, different than any other in the country. And I found it to be so.

What made the difference, in my mind, is that they define themselves as a welcoming chapter and do everything they can to be inclusive.

At the first gathering, all those who were there for the first time were introduced, welcomed, and given a sheet of 15 norms that form the basis of behavior that is expected. These norms are not rules to be enforced but rather expectations for communal practice in the chapter. And they are rather informal and totally explicit at the same time. Here's one norm that I particularly liked: "We maintain a supportive attitude toward chapter leaders, avoiding the posture of a fussy customer."

An orientation on the norms and the UU Minister's Association ethics was offered for the first timer. And there were other things, both big and small.

The registration form was set up so that those attending can either add to or take from a common subsidy fund, which was totally compatible with Norm #1, which states "that attendance at collegial gatherings is esteemed and encouraged (as well as subsidized, when needed.); (clearly stated) and we respect the judgment of each colleague regarding their own attendance."

Throughout the weekend, colleagues took the opportunity to introduce themselves and say "welcome." Following an impromptu exchange of an Arctic coat at lunch, the next gathering began with an explanation that what we saw at lunch was that one minister, who was then named, was leaving Fairbanks, AK, to serve a congregation in warmer climes and that she was bequeathing her warm coat to the incoming minister, who was also then named. Every detail of the weekend was made available to everyone. This chapter had a consciousness and a goal of being visibly and consistently inclusive.

At the closing circle, the words of the traditional song were on sheets of paper laid in the middle of the floor, and the song was sang twice, explicitly explaining that it was so that newcomers would have the opportunity to sing it through, become more familiar with it and participate fully in the closing gathering.

And I, who sometimes can feel shy and self-conscious, felt welcomed. And with such a welcome I actually allowed myself to feel like I belonged.

So belonging is dependent on feeling connected. And feeling connected begins with feeling ourselves in relation to the outer group. The norms and traditions of the Pacific Northwest District were a tremendous tool to help acclimate people into a culture, and help to foster an environment for belonging.

So what are the conditions and circumstances that help you to create a sense of belonging in your life?

I'd like you to consider this question and I am hopeful that you are willing to take about five minutes and reflect on a time in your life when you felt like you belonged in a group of people. When you have that moment in your mind, reflect on the conditions that created that experience of feeling like you belonged and write it on the piece of paper that you got when you entered the sanctuary.

What we're trying to accomplish with this ritual is to consider the conditions necessary to create a belonging environment. What was it in that moment that contributed to you feeling that way?

So get out your piece of paper, a pen, and recall a time when you felt like you belonged in a group of people, and then, writing legibly, name the conditions that existed so that you were able to experience that feeling.

When you have finished writing, please roll up your paper the long way, and place it anywhere on this lattice chalice. When you return to your seats, please fill out the special interest survey prepared by the Membership Committee.

Ritual (*with the chant*), "I hear you calling my name, I feel you holding me. I hear you calling my name, I feel you holding me. Calling my name, holding me; welcoming me in a circle of love."

Thank you so much from your participation. After services today, we'll be moving this chalice into the foyer. I invite you to read what others have written about the conditions that help us feel like we belong. Hopefully, as we all become more aware of the level of inclusion necessary for us to feel like we belong, our own sense of belonging here at South Nassau UU Congregation will increase. We, like the Pacific Northwest District can embrace an inclusiveness that enhances the welcoming atmosphere of this congregation.

Also, mark on your calendars for the next time that we'll use this chalice, which will be on October 26, in a service entitled, "In the Movie Version." In that service, I'll be asking you to think about the movie version of this congregation at a moment in time 10 years from now -- and to tell the story of how it got there. We're looking to have fun as we imagine the movie version of this congregation. It's also the date of Children's Halloween Party and I invite you to come as your favorite movie character. There will be an art opening that day -- followed by the last of the small group interview meetings, which begin on Wednesday, October 22. (Sign up in the foyer today!) The Transition Team will be supplementing the opening food, so prepare for an abundant and fun exploration of the movie version of SNUUC.

All of these activities are in support of your congregational transformation. It's an opportunity to redefine yourself. To create a new story of belonging – to let go of the constructs, whatever they might be.

In closing, I want to tell you briefly of the story of this lattice structure. I built this chalice with my older brother, who has lived in the Pacific Northwest since he graduated high school in 1972.

My brother and I have not had a close relationship and the story that I always told is that my brother, while growing up, tormented me. He taunted me in the hall when I was lined up in front of my third grade classroom; he harassed me during every commercial when we watched television together as teenagers. And I was hopeful that in my year, living 45 minutes from him during my internship, that we would be able to come to some kind of terms about our history.

So when I had this vision of a lattice structure, built like a wine case, that I could use for rituals and the gathering of information, I asked my brother, who has an amazing woodshop, for his help.

He was willing. He rigged a way to notch the 1/8-inch hardwood material; and came up with the idea of the shape of a chalice. We spent hours figuring out the length of the pieces, whether we had enough material and then went to work cutting them. We excitedly put it together.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly, until we got into the middle of the piece when it began to torque and bend. My brother, who traditionally has struggles with anger, became very frustrated. Becoming afraid that he would lash out at me, I suggested that we stop and have lunch. He was unwilling and I did something that I wished that I had done in high school. I removed myself. If he wasn't going to stop for lunch, I would. And I did. When I returned, he had figured out that we needed to increase the width of the slot that we were cutting and we needed to re-cut pieces that had cracked when he had tried to hammer them into place.

By the end of the afternoon, the chalice was together. My brother tenderly put it in my car and asked me to call when I had successfully taken it out. He was attentive and he followed through, even before I could notify him that all was well. I had learned that I could be responsible for my own well being. I learned there was more than my brother's frustration.

Through the year, I came to trust him and we shared our stories and experiences. He reminded me of lots of good times that we had shared. He articulated how he felt abandoned by me at certain times. We came out to each other in a way, sharing our vulnerabilities, understanding our connected and disconnected stories. We enhanced our sense of belonging as siblings.

Belonging is an inside and outside job. It's a both/and. It comes from a place within us where we recognize all the parts of ourselves, and it comes from a place of sharing, where we are intentional about inviting people in.

I am hopeful that as we continue our transitional work that you'll have the opportunity to explore the old stories, redefine the social norms, and create an atmosphere of explicit belonging, exploring what has come before, and building, in the present, an anticipation of a glorious future.

In the days ahead, I invite you to read what others have written and to talk with each other about those things that you hold in your heart.

All in a circle of love. All in a community where we all belong.

May it be so.

HYMN #349 We Gather Together

CLOSING WORDS: What a bouquet by Thomas Rhodes

We come in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes.
Some of us grow in bunches.
Some of us grow alone.
Some of us are cupped inward,
And some of us spread ourselves out wide.
Some of us are old and dried and tougher than we appear.
Some of us are still in bud.
Some of us grow low to the ground,
And some of us stretch toward the sun.
Some of us feel like weeds, sometimes.
Some of us carry seeds, sometimes.
Some of us are prickly, sometimes.
Some of us smell.
And all of us are beautiful.
What a bouquet of people we are!

BENEDICTION AND EXTINGUISHING OF CHALICE

Community means strength that joins our strength
to do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing. A circle of friends.
Someplace where we can be free.

May we be reminded of that strength
Until we are together again.

Go in peace.