

Radical Hospitality

by Rev. Don Garrett

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So – what kind of radical are you?

Although Unitarian Universalist congregations say they are open to everyone, we tend to draw more than our fair share of people with radical agendas for changing one aspect of our culture or another. There is historical precedent for this. Whether it was the abolition of slavery, suffrage, equal rights, workplace safety, economic justice, improved education, or world peace, Unitarian Universalists have a history of working to create a better world.

Our congregation is a hotbed of radical agendas, from environmental concerns, economic justice, marriage and immigration equality, political reform, and many, many more.

So I ask, what kind of radical are you?

Today I invite you to consider an entirely new radical agenda, one that can include all the others. In fact, it may help bring about change more than anything else we can do. I invite you to consider radical, revolutionary hospitality.

There may well be nothing else we can do that has more power to change the world than radical hospitality, the practice of spontaneous kindness with no strings attached.

Although we all appreciate receiving hospitality, we've probably developed some sensitivity to detecting self-serving motives that can masquerade as kindness. For example, we tend to discount kindnesses we receive from salespeople, politicians or others whose self-interest depends on our favor.

But the real thing: hospitality that is good, selfless, generous, and kind – has such a wonderful effect on us. It can warm our hearts and loosen our fears. It can help us unfold and blossom the way a tender flower bud is transformed by the touch of the warm sun in springtime.

Can you recall times when hospitality has touched you, warmed you, helped you to feel safe and at ease?

I remember one summer afternoon when I was 18. I had a motorcycle that year and delighted in my ability to go from city to city on a whim. One day when I was riding back home from an overnight visit to another town, the sky suddenly turned dark and a brisk wind came up. I felt what seemed like bullets hitting me, stinging me through my leather jacket and I realized they were large raindrops hitting me at 50 miles an hour. I slowed down as the rain grew into a torrent and was soon drenched, soaked to the skin.

As I pulled over to the side of the road, I noticed a group of people enjoying the summer rain from the safety of their covered front porch. They noticed me, called to me and welcomed me in. They welcomed me warmly, offered me towels and refreshment and invited me to stay as long as I liked.

I made new friends that day, friends I never saw again, but remain in my heart to this day as their generosity and my gratitude became part of the story of my life, a part that helps to make me feel safer, a little bit more at home in the world, and inclined to pay it forward with acts of generosity and kindness to others in need.

I remember the first time I met a true spiritual teacher. When I was 19 I attended a weekend retreat with Philip Kaplau, the first Western Zen master. I didn't know what to expect, but didn't need to. His simple presence had an effect more powerful than a hundred welcomes. I had been impressed by the strength of people's emotional displays before, but Philip Kaplau's unconflicted clarity and warmth was stronger than any anger I'd ever encountered. Just to be in his presence was to experience a kind of peace and love and clarity that was truly beyond all understanding. You just can't make this stuff up! No matter whatever difficulties I've faced since then, the undeniable certainty that conscious love was the center of all things has never left me. His generosity of spirit and heart changed and enriched my life forever.

Some years later I experienced a series of personal crises, including the loss of a marriage and friendships. I built a small business with a one-person staff. I practiced the arts of typography and graphic design, my customers in

corporate office parks and my studio in a house in the woods. I worked 10, 12, 14-hour days with essentially no social life whatsoever. When the business finally failed for complex economic reasons, I found myself anxious and alone, isolated and depressed, unable to socialize in even the most limited ways.

I realized I needed help, and this is when I found the Community Church of Chapel Hill in North Carolina. I appreciated their liberal theology and commitment to social justice, but beyond that they offered me what I needed the most: radical hospitality. I was often anxious and tongue-tied, but they welcomed me anyway. When they sought me in coffee hour to welcome me into their community, I was often so anxious that I would dash for the door after only a minute or so. But they didn't hold this against me. No one took it as a sign of personal affront. Next week they were just as kind and welcoming as before. I'd never before experienced generosity that was simultaneously gentle and relentless. I felt safe. I relaxed. I blossomed.

So this radically liberal congregation of religious heretics lived the fundamental value of hospitality as well or better than others with a more traditional theology. They proved that real religion isn't about what you think nearly so much as what you do; that real religion is less about what is in your mind than it is about what's in your heart.

The origins of the Jewish religious tradition are rooted in hospitality, welcoming the stranger. Abraham and Sarah left their homeland to find a new life in a new land. They depended on the hospitality of those in the new land, and offered open-handed welcome and generosity to all they met. It is said that they built a home with entrances on all four sides so that all could enter, no matter where they came from.

The Hebrew people also were strangers in Egypt when they went there to avoid famine in their homeland. Joseph and Mary were homeless strangers that night in Bethlehem when they needed a place to rest and give birth to their child.

The Muslim tradition is also rooted in hospitality. In Islam, the hospitality relationship takes on another dimension not always present in other traditions. They view it as a triangular relationship, including host, stranger, and God. They believe that sustenance is a right rather than a gift, and their duty to provide

assistance is a duty to God, not to the stranger. In this way, there is no judgment of the worthiness of the recipient – the act of hospitality is itself an act of worship. The value here is placed on opening the heart of the giver rather than on judging the receiver. This is radical hospitality.

What I am calling radical hospitality, Stephanie Spellers calls “radical welcome” in her book of the same name. She says that “radical welcome is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, presence, voices, and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society.” She says that, “Your church may be predominantly white or Latino, wealthy or working-class, gay or straight, middle-aged or fairly young. Regardless of your demographic profile, you still have a margin, a disempowered Other who is in your midst or just outside your door. In fact, you may be The Other. Radical welcome is concerned with the transformation and opening of individual hearts, congregations and systems so that The Other might find I your community a warm place and a mutual embrace *and* so that you are finally free to embrace and be transformed by authentic relationship with the margins.”

Spellers relates Miroslav Volf’s four stages of embrace as a basis for doing this:

“Act One: Opening the arms. This move telegraphs the desire to reach beyond yourself in order to connect with the other.” When we open our arms we open our hearts to the other as well. The act of opening our arms can require courage.

“Act Two: Waiting. You cannot force the other to come inside. You cannot reach out and grasp and coerce. You must wait at the boundary” for the other to respond to your invitation. The act of waiting can require patience.

“Act Three: Closing. After the other steps into the embrace, there is closing.” This is the forming of a relationship in which the identities of both the self and the other are respected and maintained even as both are changed.

And finally, “Act Four: Opening the arms. Because the two have not melted into one, you may once again open your arms. Now you have the chance to look at

yourself and rediscover your own identity, enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left.”

In many congregations there is a subtle pressure to identify the kind of people we want as members. We want people who can participate; we want people who can support the church financially; we want people who behave properly; we want people we can understand . . . it often boils down to: we want people like us. In fact, in a survey conducted at this year’s annual meeting of the Joseph Priestley district of the Unitarian Universalist Association, nearly 63% of the respondents said that their church was important to them because they valued getting together with like-minded people to share ideas and work toward common goals.

What does this say about our spirit of radical hospitality? Instead of looking for people we like because they are like us, we should be looking for people who need what we have to offer! First and foremost, radical hospitality asks for us to open our hearts to those with whom we may *not* feel comfortable or with whom we may disagree, to do the hard work of finding common ground beneath our differences, to believe that our church is outreach every bit as much as it is ingathering. We need to remember that every embrace excludes more than it includes and that we need to expand our embrace over and over and over again if we are to live into our fullest potential as a beloved community of faith.

This is the basic work of a true religious community, work we do every day and every time we gather. I ask you: Do you make a point of extending the generosity of your welcome to those you don’t know well, or do you mostly speak with your friends? How about that person who looks odd or different or stand-offish? Do we let ourselves off the hook, steer around toward a safer conversation? Don’t we realize that these are the very people who may well need our hospitality the most?

We have hospitality teams in our congregation to help set the table for our welcome. We bring food and refreshments. We greet people as they enter. It’s easy to get do and rewarding, but sometimes we may feel uneasy about welcoming strangers, or even members on a Sunday morning. We fear we might say the wrong thing or commit some other kind of gaffe. I invite you to frame

things differently in the spirit of radical hospitality. Whenever you feel insecure or unsure, turn your attention toward a spirit of compassionate inclusion instead. Be more curious than anxious. Ask the visitor how you can help them today. Ask them to tell you about their lives, their hopes, their dreams.

As we open our hearts to others we unlock the love and compassion trapped inside. The risk is small and the reward is great. When you are invited to participate in our hospitality teams I urge you to say yes. But you needn't wait until then. The opportunities for radical hospitality are always right here and now, waiting for us to unlock our hearts to embrace the other.

May it be so.