

“Theological Hospitality”

A Sermon Delivered for
The First Parish of Needham
Sunday, December 2, 2007
Lucas Hergert, Intern Minister

Reading: *Of Hospitality*, by Jacques Derrida

“Enter quickly,” quickly, in other words, without delay and without waiting. Desire is waiting for what does not wait. The guest must make haste. Desire measures time since its abolition in the stranger’s entering movement: the stranger, here the awaited guest, is not only someone to whom you say “come,” but “enter,” enter without waiting, make a pause in our home without waiting, hurry up and come in, “come inside,” “come within me,” not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me, which means, by the same token, also take my place, don’t content yourself with coming to meet me or “into my home.” Crossing the threshold is entering and not only approaching or coming. (123)

Two weeks ago I hosted Thanksgiving for my parents, my two siblings, my aunts, and my three cousins. Preparing my house and cooking dinner for that many people took a tremendous amount of effort, and I still do not think I am completely recovered from the event. In conjunction with all of the wonderful and exciting moments of catching up with family, showing my cousins around Boston, and eating an excellent meal together, there were many parts of the event that were not so great. One of my aunts brought a puppy with her, one that enjoyed chewing on the leg of one of my dining room chairs. My eight-year old cousin threw a temper tantrum that lasted for about an hour. I am still not sure what caused it, except maybe the excitement of being so far away from home. And I also became terribly lost as I was trying to find my way to Plymouth so that my family could see the famous rock and tour a Mayflower replica.

I loved having everyone up here. I was also, at times, quite frustrated. In thinking about this experience that is so central to hospitality--that peculiar moment of enjoying the guest that is in one’s home while, at the same time, losing patience--I started to wonder about the relationship between my hospitality to my family this past week and our hospitality as Unitarian Universalists. We are a tradition that welcomes others from very different backgrounds and perspectives. As a religious community we are allergic to creeds and dogmas, and welcome an individual search for truth and meaning. We are a capacious faith, one that allows for many different possibilities and expressions of what it means to be religious.

We also have problems with diversity, problems that are far from being resolved. Pluralism, a lot like having one’s family over for Thanksgiving, is sometimes frustrating and tries one’s patience. This morning, I would like to ask what it means to gather as a diverse community--what that has meant to Unitarians and Universalists throughout our history and what it means to us, today.

Over a hundred years ago, Unitarians and Universalists questioned whether Christianity was the only legitimate expression of religion. Throughout the nineteenth century, Unitarians had sown the seeds for a new understanding of religious difference. The Transcendentalist movement asserted that religious truths, in order to be true, could not be dependent upon history. They therefore had to take place outside of the history of

any particular religion. These Unitarian innovators slowly worked themselves to the conclusion that religions besides Christianity could express the same universal truths that were found within Christianity.

In 1894 the World Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago, and for many it was the first time hearing the voices of people from very different faiths. Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians of many denominations, and others spoke about their practices and convictions. To say that this was the most important moment in our religious movement at the end of the nineteenth century is no exaggeration.

Responses to this event varied considerably. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister, abolitionist, and editor of the poet Emily Dickinson, exemplified one of our responses at that time. A pioneer of what he called the “sympathetic” approach to world religions, he believed that men and women should be generous to other faith traditions. His idea of “sympathy” was a way of bridging differences so that particular religions would no longer do battle with one another. “When we fully comprehend the sympathy of religions,” Higginson writes, “we shall deal with other faiths on equal terms” (Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 108).

In a world that today, and no less in Higginson’s time, proposes the alternative of religious violence, this idea of the sympathy of religions is an attractive one. And it has been an attractive one for many within our Unitarian Universalist movement--so much so that people throughout the last one hundred years have articulated our faith in very similar ways. Many believe in bridging differences and finding commonalities, because differences contain the specter of danger, conflict, adversity.

But there is a problem with this idea of the sympathy of religions. Pushed to its extreme, the bridging of differences is also the obliteration of differences. If differences are dangerous or problematic, then the solution must be finally to do away with them. Higginson says that the goal of the sympathetic perspective on religions is that all particular traditions will “disappear . . . absorbed into something larger and grander” (109). He wanted to find what he called the “piety of the world,” rather than the piety of this religion or that religion. The cost of such global piety, of such universal religion, was difference itself. Any part of religion that was too particular, too idiosyncratic, and even too complicated had to be left behind. What we have when all of these particularities of religion are gone is a sort of bland universalism that doesn’t welcome diversity and difference, but is rather hostile to them.

Over the summer I worked as a chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. At times, that work made me seriously question my sanity. One of the things that this hospital would do is place people on call for an entire week. (During this time, I discovered a change in my relationship to inanimate objects that bordered on pantheism. I found myself talking and even making deals with my pager, begging it to keep quiet while I got a few hours of sleep.) So at the end of a long week of seeing patients for seven hours a day and then getting paged into the hospital in the middle of night, I climbed onto the train on my way to daily rounds. I looked at all of the happy and well-rested people on the subway with contempt. Which is of course the same moment that my pager went off.

When I called the hospital, I got a very anxious nurse telling me to get in as soon as I could. There was a mother about to give birth, and it was apparent that her child would die shortly afterward. She wanted her child to be baptized. I hung up the phone with a growing sense of dread. I could not do a baptism for so many reasons. I do not believe in

original sin, or that children need to have them washed away at their birth. And also a practical but pressing reason: How does one do a baptism? I had no idea!

Upon reaching the hospital, I resolved to find a Catholic chaplain who could solve this entire dilemma. Unfortunately, no one--not the Catholic sister who was my supervisor, not a Catholic priest in the chaplains' office, not one of my fellow students who knew how to do a baptism--was there. I had to make the decision whether I would be present for this mother who was about to lose her child, or if I would turn in the other direction. Taking a deep breath, and not knowing how this would work out, I ran as fast as I could to the labor and delivery ward.

When I got to the appropriate floor, the nurses immediately started dressing me in paper scrubs that covered me from head to toe. The entire situation was surreal. I felt like I was being prepped for a role that I did not know how to perform, that I was dressing as a character for a play whose lines I never knew. The nurse finished dressing me and told me to wait by the door, and left to see whether it was time. At this point I was almost panicked with anxiety. I prayed a quick prayer that I would find the right words for this mother who was about to lose her baby--perhaps before she got a chance to hold it. I tried to reach below my anxiety to a space of calm, to a space where I could be present for the mother.

At that exact moment, my cell phone rang. It was the Catholic priest. I don't know how or why or even if I believe that it happened, but he called me the moment before I was summoned into the delivery room. The priest assured me that I could do the baptism without being Catholic and informed me of the appropriate formula. He apologized for not being there and told me that he would see the family later that day.

At that moment, I was ushered into the delivery room. The father had arrived shortly before I did, and I was introduced to both parents. Moments later, the nurse carried something small, purple, and unmoving over to us. It looked like a fetus in the middle stages of development. It was much too small. And the fact that it did not move or make a sound led me to think that it might have already been dead.

I took the water that had been provided me and poured it on the child's head. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May you feel the love of God and the love of your parents." As I said these words, the mother broke down in uncontrollable sobbing. It was at that moment that I got it. Through the act of baptism, the baby's parents were saying, "I love you" in the deepest, most spiritual sense. Our differences of practice and theology were a conduit for a profound and transformative experience. By dwelling at the threshold of our differences, by not trying to change or avoid each other, I was able to bear witness to a powerful and changing moment. And I felt incredibly privileged, despite my theological misgivings, to be a part of that.

This story is not about finding commonality in our experiences and putting aside our religious differences. It is not about the sympathy of religions, of finding a core spiritual experience that obliterates our differences. The family asked for a Catholic baptism. They came from a tradition and a theology where that means certain things, and those things were not changed by our encounter. I, too, come from a tradition. I am a Unitarian Universalist who does not believe in original sin, and does not believe that children need to be baptized. Those were also unchanged by our encounter. The parents left Catholic, and I left a Unitarian Universalist.

If we left with our differences, we also left deeply changed, transformed. In the reading for this morning, French philosopher Jacques Derrida writes, "The stranger . . .

the awaited guest, is not only someone to whom you say 'come,' but 'enter' . . . 'come within me,' not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me . . ." (125). Hospitality, Derrida reminds us, is a demand, a radical demand to live more deeply into our differences. It is about encountering the different and dwelling with it, entering into it, occupying it. It is not about leaving difference behind, but about being changed in our encounter with it.

Unitarian Universalism is a theologically diverse tradition that is far from settling the question of theological diversity. Often, I think, this has to do with our understanding of difference as something that causes conflict, adversity, divisiveness. The UU Christian wonders why the UU humanist won't believe in God. The UU humanist wonders why the UU Christian won't just get over the whole Jesus thing. And the UU pagan wonders why hymns to the Goddess seem to make everybody uncomfortable.

I am not here to say that we should be less Christian, less humanist, less pagan. I am here to pose a question, albeit a radical one. What would it look like if, as Unitarian Universalists, we stopped asking members to be less different? What if, instead, we treated members of different faiths as our awaited guests? What if one member said, "I don't believe in God, but I am so happy to hear what that means to someone else"? What if each of us said, "come within," "occupy this space with me," "change me." Change me.

I can't even imagine the possibility this act of radical hospitality would invite. This is precisely the work to which we are called.