

“Inherit Worth and Dignity; Does This Apply to the Election?”
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Reading

The Guest House by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness.
Some momentary awareness comes.
An unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows
Who sweep your house empty of its furniture.
Still treat each guest honorably
For he or she may be clearing you out of some new sorrow.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice
Meet them at the door, laughing
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Sermon

My sister is five years older than me. While growing up we shared a room together for about 10 years. We were close, at least as close as our ages would allow us to be. One a child, the other a preteen. Funny how at certain times in our lives, five years apart seems like an ocean and other times it seems like a single drop of water.

Without air conditioning, on hot summer nights when we were supposed to be sleeping, we would draw alphabet letters on each others' backs spelling out secret messages. The tickling letters cooled us off, the shared laughter held our bond of sisterhood strong.

Years later when she was in college and I was in high school we went with our other sister camping in the Boundary Waters. Older now, our lives were not so tethered. She had a job and along with classes she was gone a lot. I was active in high school and out with friends. Our lives were crossing paths less often and outside friendships were teaching us new ways to see the world.

While hiking and canoeing we found ourselves disagreeing about politics, reproductive rights and gay rights. Yet, I still fondly remember when a major storm thundered over head, we huddled in our tent,

laughing and singing the sound track to The Wizard of Oz at the top of our lungs to chase out any fears we had from the storm. The bond of sisterhood still held, but threads of commonality were beginning to unravel.

Unravel, our country feels like it is unraveling. In less than five months we go to the polls and vote for our next president of the United States of America. If the last year and even just this last week at the Republican National Convention are any indication, we are in for a wild ride. I can only imagine what the Democratic National Convention will hold.

My Facebook is full of folks posting links to articles or videos that show just how wrong the other party is, how dangerous the world will be if their candidate wins. I am sure that folks from the other side of the fence are looking at similar stories about the other candidate.

Our country has become more and more divided. The words liberal and conservative have become derogatory labels that taste sour when spoken by the opposition. And I have to confess that I can be just as guilty. I do like to discuss issues with those who have a studied sense of their ideologies. But when I meet someone who is just shouting back the vitriol they hear on their stream of news making, I quietly make a mental note, file their name in the back of my head and silently step away. Come on admit it, you've done it too.

Fellowship member Shannon Kenevan, jokingly posted on Facebook one day that he was only going to be friends with folks who voted like he did in the school board elections. He then apologized to all the friends he would be un-friending because of their votes. Of course he was kidding and he did no such thing. But his words certainly captured what many of us feel at times.

New York Times writer Nicholas Kristoff writes that “We progressives believe in diversity and we want women, Blacks, Latinos, gays and Muslims at the table, just as long as they aren't conservatives.” Right wing conservatives want to push back laws on abortion, civil rights and universal health care. They feel that liberals only want to allow people to live off the government. They fear that all of this liberalism is causing our nation to go to hell in a hand basket.

As we pick our camps; Trump and Fox News, Clinton and MSN we also pick the truths that we choose to believe and stand behind. And then as we follow our tribe we hear just how stupid the other side is over and over and over again. Many of us have the 24 hour news feed pinging on our phones or in the background on our TV's fueling this divisiveness all day long.

Many of us find this division within our families, neighborhoods and our workplace. We begin to figure out who is “safe” to talk too. We know who gets our way of thinking. It may be to the point where we don't even fraternize much with those who think differently than ourselves.

And for me that becomes part of the problem. There has been a shift away from what at one time held a recognition of certain commonalities. Like me and my sister, we come from the same family, the same experiences and yet we have come to a place of thinking and acting that is so removed from one another that we cannot understand how to be in this new place together.

Thanksgiving or Christmas finds many of us sitting across the turkey from each other. Either we are tip toeing around politics with polite banter or blaming the state of our country on each other's personal beliefs. Blood pressures begin to rise; no longer able to hold our tongues, the room erupts into a free for all that matches a Dr. Phil show. Whoo Hoo! Happy Holidays!

If you are sitting in this room, you have known that feeling of being with someone who thinks and believes very differently than you. As Unitarian Universalists, we admit, readily that we are different than mainstream religions and we are okay with that. In fact we are proud of that. We work hard to be respectful to the religious beliefs of others.

We readily stand up for social justice for all and that often puts us at odds with other folks. Our Black Lives Matter banner targets us for criticism and fear from those who feel we just can't see that all lives matter. But instead, we chose to see this as an opportunity for education and compassion because as a community we hold that Black Lives Matter to be an important truth that we need to stand behind.

Our fourth principle calls us to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each and every individual. We feel really good about accepting that, this feels right in our bones. We teach it in Religious Education to our children, it is written on the walls of our lobby. But wait...if we mean everyone does that apply to bible banging, homophobic, immigrant hating, fear mongers? No, no, we can't go that far, we just can't! It feels like it goes against everything we stand for.

And perhaps it does on some levels. But what did Rumi say in our reading this morning? "Welcome and entertain them all, even if they are a crowd of sorrows who sweep your house. Still treat each guest honorably." Treating someone with dignity for being human doesn't mean you must agree with and accept their ideas. Let me say that again, treating someone with dignity for being human doesn't mean that you must agree with or accept their ideas.

This is the hard work of loving; this is the hard work of believing in justice and dignity for each individual. We belong to a bold and sometimes difficult faith tradition. We ARE called to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of that bible banging, homophobic, immigrant hating, fear monger. And truth be told, we are called to love them and embrace them right here in this building.

But we don't. They are not even here. I highly doubt any of you are bible banging, homophobic, immigrant hating, fear mongers. They say that America is never more divided then on a Sunday morning, and we are certainly doing our part here at the Fellowship.

As grown adults my sister and I continued to grow apart. Soon we seemed to choose the opposite side of almost every issue. I held up one side while she championed for the other. We each felt compelled to somehow convince the other that our own way of thinking was right and that our own values were better. Behind each others' backs we ridiculed each other to our partners and other siblings. Get togethers became increasingly uncomfortable and both of us lost interest in connecting as often. As the years went on the phone calls to each other lessened. Holidays were merely tolerated. The bond of sisterhood was barely held together by a single thread.

Krista Tippet, who is the host of the NPR program On Being, spoke at our denomination's General Assembly as the Ware lecturer, a few weeks ago in Columbus, OH. She touched on this very struggle. I would encourage you to go online and listen as she really hits the nail on the head about how we might go about finding ways to be with those we find difficult to embrace.

She says that every single time we are face to face with someone who thinks or believes differently than ourselves there is one critical thing we can do to address this conflict. We must simply believe that there is good in the other. That's it. We must simply believe that there is good in the other. Because if we do, if we can believe that, it offers us a crack in the middle where we can find commonality.

It is not easy, doing this calls for deep intention. And to be honest, she admits it's a lot easier to preach to the choir. This explains why most of us find ourselves surrounded with friends and activities to link us to like minded people. But the choir doesn't need us. Not in today's political climate. Let me repeat, the choir does not need us.

She says that the crack in the middle is the place where people absolutely refuse to see each other as evil. And sadly that is where we are today in our nation. We are seeing the other political party as evil. To step into this place where we choose to see the other as good is essential to changing this division. To step into that crack is where we need and must chose to live, if we are to make any changes. For in that crack is a holy space. That is where we as Unitarian Universalists must stand if we are truly to hold to our fourth principle of believing in the inherit worth and dignity of all people.

To find that crack, that opening where we can see each other fully, she invites us to ask one simple question of the other and that is this....“what hurts?” This simple question invites us to search together to uncover what hurts that makes people feel these things that we cannot understand. By asking this, we are suddenly no longer required to be right or wrong. It doesn't even require us to agree. If we ask “what hurts” of each other it reveals what is at stake. It helps us to understand our beliefs and feelings in human terms, not party line terms.

Tippet says that right now, especially with the upcoming election, we must create safe space so that we can speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity. Asking “what hurts,” allows us to see what is causing our family members or co workers to side with things that don't make sense to us. It opens us up to seeing their vulnerability and fears in a much more human way.

As years went on my sister and I worked hard at avoiding each other. We tried to keep things light when we were together. Our siblings did not quite understand the dance but it seemed like the two of us rubbed up against each other like two pieces of rough sand paper.

When our father died we both had to fly to my parents' home together. It meant sitting side by side on the plane for four hours. But somehow it was different that day. Our grief had softened our hearts. Our grief reminded us of a love that used to hold us together. On that flight, we found that crack where we were able to see the goodness that was still in each of us. This time instead of standing on opposite sides of issues, clutching our values and beliefs firmly in our fists, I got to hear what hurt for her. She and her husband were scared about losing rights, safety and things that they valued. I found that we shared some similar concerns. We realized that we both wanted many of the same things; we just had different ways of getting there. We stood in that space, that crack and we were finally on holy ground, seeing each other as humans not just ideologies.

Educator and author Parker Palmer calls us to cultivate an understanding of the value of otherness. We grow the most in our lives, not by preaching to the choir but stepping outside of our tribes and realizing that “us and them” does not mean “us versus them.” Palmer says that this requires us to cultivate a supple heart. A supple heart is one that can bend, receive and give without brittleness. When we refuse to listen, when we demand that others change their way of thinking to our own, that is a brittle heart.

By asking “what hurts?” we allow the other to show us their pain, to show us why they hold to beliefs that are so different than ours. Krista Tippet says it is the one thing that allows us to mine truth as best we can. If we only listen to OUR hurts we can never truly know the other.

Tippet says that the words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world and how we treat others. Right now, the world needs the most vivid and transformative universe of words that you and I can draw on to give voice to how we are with one another.

It begins here. It begins with you and me in this place of worship. It matters what we say to one another and we are called to reach out in love, to reach out with respect and dignity even if what the other thinks goes against what we hold to be true.

We cannot heal this nation; we cannot find peace until we listen with a supple heart. Listening is an act of love. And many of us are not listening. We're too busy telling. We are too ready to reject, dismiss and cut off the other. Isn't that the very thing that drives you nuts about the other side? They do the same and then we never really listen, and we never really hear "What hurts?"

I wish I could tell you that my sister and I continued to approach each other with the supple hearts that we had on that flight to my father's funeral. But to be honest, it continues to be a work in progress. I'm pretty sure that she will vote for a candidate that I cannot support. A candidate that if elected for president will make me seriously wonder who we are as a nation any more. And guess what? I know she would say the exact thing about the candidate that I will support. But I am determined to keep trying, to keep approaching her with as supple a heart as I can muster.

And even if her candidate does not win, all of this just does not go away. I think that we must still keep asking each other "what hurts?" Because the hurt and fear that elevated her candidate will still be held in the hearts of those supporters. And if her candidate wins, there will be different fears and hurts will be held by the other side. It doesn't matter what side we are actually talking about because for both sides, those hurts and fears are real, just perhaps, different. If we do not start listening and believing with our whole hearts that those on the other side are essentially good people, we will only continue to grow more divisive.

As Rumi said, "This being human is just a guest house. The Dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door, laughing and invite them in."

I know this is hard work, I know that we feel justified in ridiculing and demeaning those who we feel are taking our country in the wrong direction. Please, please know that I am not asking you to support or defend anyone who is seeking violence and harm for others. We simply must stand up against that and hold tightly to our belief in justice for all.

But the WORDS we choose are important. If we are not careful, we too join the language of hate and divisiveness, the very thing we may despise in the other. We must pause and then mindfully decide to see the good, decide to step into that crack of understanding and then ask them "what hurts?" And then listen...give them your whole heart and listen.

May it be so.