

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Filling in Holes

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Sunday 24 February 2019

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Readings

The first reading is by Emily Dickinson

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain

The Second reading is *A Warm Spot* by Jeffery Lockwood

Curled beneath a thin, woolen blanket not quite long enough to reach from chin to toes, I was shivering in the penetrating dampness of early spring in a drafty farmhouse on New Zealand's South Island. A gray drizzle hushed the world.

My host, having cleaned up the kitchen and tended to the animals, tapped on my door on his way to bed and peeked in, holding a hot water bottle. Had God appeared bearing the keys to the pearly gates, I could not have been more thankful. As the heat flowed into my body from that flabby rubber bag, I recalled my journey and the power of another kind of warmth.

The flight to New Zealand had been arduous a hectic scramble to make a connection in Los Angeles, an insipid dinner on the plane, and a shivering night of sporadic sleep in a sitting position. I don't know why international flights are gradually cooled during transit, but halfway through the journey I was freezing. What stood out vividly in my memory was a flight attendant who saw my battle against the cold. In the middle of the night she brought me a blanket.

The airlines remind us that the flight attendants are concerned primarily with our safety, not our comfort. I'm sure that my blanket-bearer was not expected to walk the aisles in search of shivering passengers. While her small act of kindness did not take any great effort, did not involve a Mother Teresa sort of sacrifice or heroic courage, it was also not necessary. She cared enough to notice my discomfort and provide a bit of warmth amid the icy disinterest of modern travel. This was the zenith of my trek, the only moment in a blurred voyage that remains as a clear memory.

To warm our bodies and spirits, we do not need to be immersed in a hot tub or bathed in kindness. The hot water bottle covered a few square inches, and the flight attendant's act took a few moments. In the cold reality of the modern world, a heartfelt smile, a door held open, or a sincere "thank you" may be the packet of warmth that another person presses to his chest to feel comfort on a soul-chilling day.

Sermon

Lately I've been thinking about, well a lot of things really, it's a very busy time in my head. I've been thinking about politics. I've been thinking about snow, and un-shoveled sidewalks and parking lots. I've been thinking about the founding of this country, and my personal ancestry and how those two things might be related. I've been thinking about social safety nets, and how we are in desperate need of them in this country. I've been thinking about drinking more water. I've been thinking about bodies and minds and hearts, particularly the ones belonging to you in this room.

I've been thinking lately.

I've been thinking about what it means when just a few people show up to something. And I've been thinking about Emily Dickenson.

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain*

I've been thinking lately, each time I am able to ease pain, each person that shows up to that thing, each one of you sitting here, are valuable. You are inherently worth so much. Your life has already changed someone's for the better. Your presence matters – exactly as you are.

And it makes me wonder, who isn't here who needs to be? Whose voice has been left out and its within our control to change it?

Can we draw our circle wider? Can we think expansively and inclusively, and with the input of those voices?

Imagine with me. A school, or a church, or any building. It has a big set of stairs leading up to the front, and a long ramp on the side of the building. And imagine it's snowed like it did last night. Imagine that the person clearing the snow for those trying to enter the building is busy shoveling off the front steps. Now imagine that a person using a wheelchair comes to get into the building, and sees this, and asks the person clearing the snow to shovel the ramp. The snow remover says "all these people are waiting to use the steps." And the wheel chair user says "But if you shovel the ramp, we ALL could get in the building."

What would it take to make it so we could all participate, so that people who use wheelchairs and other assistance devices, and people of all sizes and shapes, and people with neurodiversity, were thought of in planning, not just in after thoughts?

It would take compassion. It would take empathy. It would take talking to varieties of people with varieties of needs. It involves forgetting average, or at least adapting what average means.

Why does average mean a slim tall person? That doesn't fit most of us. A quarter of the US population have disabilities. Three quarters of us are quote unquote overweight, whatever that means. Twenty percent of the population have neurodiversity. Average isn't so average anymore.

Imagine how our public spaces would look different if they were planned to serve people who have a variety of needs. Well, there is a movement of designers out there doing just this. It's called Universal Design. From their website:

"[This model creates] the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability."

"If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits. By considering the diverse needs and abilities of all throughout the design process, universal design creates products, services and environments that meet peoples' needs."

What would it look like if we respected that we are all made differently? What if we redefine wholeness? What if wholeness isn't based on what our bodies are capable of, what if wholeness isn't based on what our brains are capable of? What if Wholeness is based on our inherent worth. Our inherent dignity? Isn't that why we're here?

As you know, our Sanctuary team is hosting monthly discussions on the book "Tell Me How it Ends" by Valeria Luiselli. The book is based on 40 questions she asks undocumented Latin American youth and children who are facing deportation. One of the young people told her, "The United States is a country full of holes...But it's also a place full of individuals who, out of a sense of duty toward other people, perhaps, are willing to fill those holes in one by one."

There are a lot of things wrong with this country, our immigration system being one of them. There are a lot of holes to fill, but it our job, our role, our duty, perhaps, to fill them. "Because, [as Luiselli writes] being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look."

It is the role of compassion to fill in the holes that we see so everyone can be whole. Prioritizing movement and transportation of everyone when the snow gets bad. Shoveling sidewalks and cutouts and bus stops so that people can actually use them. Prioritizing inclusive language, so that everyone can hear their identity in how we name varieties of people.

Filling in potholes in our understanding of justice. Does your feminism leave out women of color? Transwomen? Does your climate justice include the voices of indigenous peoples? Does your racial justice recognize the intersectionality of oppressions?

According to Jarune Uwujaren and Jamie Utt writing for the website Everyday Feminism: “It makes sense in many ways that those of us with identity privilege would have a harder time including in our [justice movements] those who are oppressed. Privilege conceals itself from those who have it, and it’s a lot easier to focus on the ways that we are marginalized or oppressed.”

The lesson here is that we need to begin to explore and understand the many ways that systems of oppression pile up on people with multiple marginalized identities. Women of color are oppressed in a different way than white women. Transwomen of color are oppressed in a different way than women of color. Disabled transwomen are oppressed in a different way than able bodied transwomen.

This means we have to come to the work of justice with an “intersectional lens”, trying to understand the varieties of ways people are oppressed. Because, according to Uwujaren and Utt “it is not, in fact, possible to tease apart the oppressions that people are experiencing. Racism for women of color cannot be separated from their gendered oppression. A Trans person with a disability cannot choose which part of their identity is most in need of liberation.”

“In short, [they say] intersectionality is a framework that must be applied to all social justice work, a frame that recognizes the multiple aspects of identity that enrich our lives and experiences and that compound and complicate oppressions and marginalizations. We cannot separate multiple oppressions, for they are experienced and enacted intersectionally.”

If we are going to be filling in holes, maybe we need to start thinking about Universal Design Justice.

Here’s another image for you: There are some folks watching a baseball game, but there is a wall that they have to look over to see what’s happening. One of them is pretty tall, so can see over the fence no problem. The other is only moderately tall, so can see if they are standing on their tip-toes.

The third is quite short, so cannot see at all. They find that next to the wall there are three crates. They decide to divide them equally between the three of them. They call this Equality. The problem is the crates lifted them equally. Now the tall and the medium height person can see, but the shortest still can’t. So they redistribute the crates, with the tall person standing on the ground, the moderately tall person on one crate, and the shortest person on two crates. Now they can all see, and this is called Equity – they are all raised up to the same level.

Now, think about this from a Universal Design perspective. How would you design the space so that all three could see without anyone having to stand on a crate?

If there were no wall, or it was see through, that would remove the barrier that made the accommodations necessary. We call this Liberation.

To find Liberation we have to look at the ways our privilege limits our scope of understanding. Do we forget to be inclusive of disability when we’re talking about how to be a welcoming congregation? Have we, as Unitarian Universalists in an effort to be more inclusive of women by saying “women and men” in our sources, inadvertently left out non-binary folx?

There are so many things we can learn, if we are willing, so many ways to work together to find Liberation – to fill in holes. It seems like too much if you forget that we're all in this together.

But we know that we're ALL in this together.

We want to be liberators; we want to break down oppression. And we can. All we have to do is be willing to no longer be the center of change. We can lend our voices to others who are fighting "different fights" because really, all the fights are our fight.

We are in this together, doing our parts, filling in holes, passing out hot water bottles to warm some hands or feet, offering a blanket to a passenger with a smile, warming up their insides as well as their outsides.

We are in this together, and it's a good thing, because there are a lot of holes to fill, a lot of compassion to learn and relearn, and a lot of work left to do to get to a universal design of liberation.

Let's get to work!