

Allied Beyond Right and Wrong.

Oct. 8, 2006. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville.
Rev. Jim McKinley, Helen Bishop, and Jean Allen

Chalice-lighting:

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends. . . Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”
- Martin Luther King Jr., "The Trumpet of Conscience", 1967

Opening Words

A Message from the Hopi Elders (Shortened for emphasis)

We have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour.
Now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour
And there are things to be considered:

Where are you living?
What are you doing?
What are your relationships?
Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?
Know your garden.

It is time to speak the truth
Create your community.
Be good to each other.

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally.
Least of all ourselves. [Repeat these two lines for emphasis.]
For the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over, Gather yourselves!

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Message: Allied Beyond Right and Wrong

Speakers (in order) Rev. Jim McKinley, Helen Bishop

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field.
I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass
the world is too full to talk about.

The nature of existence is a single, unfragmented wholeness to which we belong. Connection is existential. It is a foundational underpinning of being. We are because we are connected to everything else that is. We inter-are. The universe doesn't demand or create categories of separation, we do. Since I returned from study leave in late August I have been connecting each talk to the nature of being, the nature of the universe and Unitarian Universalist theology; where theology is our largest understanding of the way things really are. It is the organizing vision within which we organize the actions of our lives or within which the actions of our lives are organized

The shorthand understanding I present for the Universalist voice of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is the oneness of the human family, one origin, one nature, one destiny. Our modern understanding of the same thought takes us out into the universe and includes all that is. Remember the joke: "What did the Zen monk say to the hot dog vendor?" [pause] "Make me one with everything." It is also a Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who reminds me most simply that the need for the cosmic hot dog vendor to make us one with everything is a need of our own making, our own creation. We are born out of the oneness: we arrive in this world one with everything. We also arrive into the divided, dividing world of human culture. We inherit and accrue the layers of culture. These layers are what Thich Nhat Hanh calls the dust of the world. It is this "dust" that separates us from who we truly are.

There are many cultural layers. Many layers can be understood to have either the form or effect of advantage or disadvantage. Privilege is the name for special right or cultural advantage granted to a person or group. Granted is the operative word here. Because of my height I am able to pick fruit higher in the tree. It does not follow that my height makes me more fit to be CEO of a company but it does create the privilege of increasing the probability of that very thing happening for me.

Culturally created or granted advantage is privilege; advantage from, luck, birth, fate, genetics, not advantage given by God in judgment and favor, and not advantage earned. Injustice then is culturally conferred disadvantage, culturally imposed separation. It is compassion and oneness withheld, compassion and oneness taken from the love of life and God.

Yet, and still, the central religious message- the very practice that makes the vast oneness of existence personal- is a message of compassion – not separating out, but caring for, caring with. The paradox here is that the religious belonging we seek is to be found not granted from the heavens, but in our own reaching out to others. It is to be found in what historian of religion, Karen Armstrong calls the transcendence of empathy – imagining ourselves in the place of others, in the place of those who are not ourselves.

Here at UUFH, we are a religious community. We are a community of faith and a wider community committed to the transformational power of coming together within and across our diversity. Diversity and all it encompasses is so much a part of our identity that it often fades into the background bin of buzz words. We are a community who often find ourselves without the means to approach the transcendence and belonging we seek. Not only that – we then beat ourselves up and each other up for not attracting the diversity we profess to be who we are.

So in order to begin, we return to where we live and our personal practice and abilities. I have found that practice itself is a useful framing for me. Of course it helps to know or name what I am practicing as a practice. Meditation or forgiveness or hospitality or generosity can each be understood as a practice, another way to approach the transcendence and belonging we seek is through the simple concept and practice of becoming an ally.

An ally is a person who helps another carry the weight of an issue, a disadvantage, an injustice that is more the other's burden. It is a burden or an issue that less directly effects the one becoming an ally and still there is a mutuality of the relationship. The easiest way for me to say it is that becoming an ally is more standing with someone than it is standing against something. [pause] Very quickly and perhaps sharply, a person who is not able to stand may remind me of the privilege in the very real care-less-ness of my language. In that moment, if I have embraced the characteristics of an ally, I cringe, I hear, maybe I apologize, and I keep trying – an ally cares with, tries with and works with a person and peoples.

In our opening reading the Hopi Elders admonished the almost impossible, “At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves, for the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.”

A more formal definition for becoming an ally says “an ally is a member of the agent social group who takes a stand against social injustice directed at target groups (whites who speak out against racism, men who are antisexist.)”

It is easier for me to explain by example. The notion of becoming an ally connects diversity with compassion, social action with personal practice. Anyone can do it, almost anytime. Everyone is called to become it all the time. It takes awareness and willingness to get started.

There are the more obvious examples and ways of recognizing being an ally to add to the two above. There is this congregation's support of a Living Wage and what we learned in becoming a Welcoming Congregation and how we continue learning as we try to live that out. There are the times when we do speak out for justice, civil rights and against racism. When we retirees and people without children support public education we are allies. When this congregation built a religious education program with only a few children in attendance, they allied themselves with the families there and the families to come.

For me, understanding my participation as part of the practice of becoming an ally opens new awarenesses – often smaller, with a new sense of personal responsibility. They are awarenesses that seem somehow more personally accessible, less institutionally remote.

[The following paragraph is Optional]

I think of learning about the importance of scent free candles in a workshop at general Assembly. I then went to the chalice shop on the display floor, only to be told that they carried those last year but nobody bought them. I got the manager and asked that they be made available again. It was not easy but even the choice to avoid the particular conflict is part of particular privilege. An ally adds their voice – and is willing to stumble in the risk of their words.

Of the many characteristics of allies, the first is faith: faith that the central transformational message of religion really is centered in compassion. The second is

awareness – looking to see—no wait, I get it, I’m using care-less language again - working to notice, the many forms and language that privilege and oppression take. And the third is one that is speaking the most to me now – willingness – a willingness to risk and make mistakes. Mistakes are different from being wrong. Mistakes happen trying to do right. Without willingness to risk mistakes we stay stuck in the performance of privilege. It is also a willingness to be confronted about my behavior and attitudes and consider change. It is hard to be oppressed or disadvantaged and not feel angry. An ally says I will try not to take it personally.

“Out beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.”

I summarize the Unitarian message of our Unitarian Universalist tradition by saying it holds up an exalted view of human possibility with Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, and other religious leaders as exemplars. These and other religious models show the way to make the oneness, the single unfragmented wholeness to which we belong, real and present in our lives. You too can find the way. You too can do the same.

We will sing the song Everything Possible. Try to Hear it not just addressed to others outside you about what they can dream but hear it addressed inside you too about how you might love. Of course not everything is possible to everyone. We started out saying that. The title of the song is not Everything *is* Possible. It is Everything Possible. So sing it, try it, dream it, go out do your stuff. And what does the person singing say they will try to do in response? “And know that I will love you still.”

Rev. Jim McKinley

Hymn No.1019: Everything Possible

We plead to each other

we all come from the same rock
we all come from the same rock
*ignoring the fact that we bend
at different temperatures
that each of us is malleable
up to a point.*

*Yes, fusion is possible
but only if things get hot enough –
all else is temporary adhesion,
patching up.*

--Cherrie Moraga, lesbian/Chicana poet,
quoted in Gay Theology Without Apology,
by Gary David Comstock (1993)

What does it mean to be part of a religious community? Jim and I agree that the job of a religious community is to expand the circle of compassion, the circle of people

about whom we might say, “I am with you.” Each of us is malleable up to a point, and one of the things that happens in religious community is that the point expands. Our minds and hearts, shaped by the cultures in which we grow up, are limited by the things known to our families, our schools, our friends. In the United States, where the norm and expectation is for a child to grow up and discover an attraction for someone of a different gender, the larger culture historically has kept the very existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or queer people very, very quiet. Our malleability around these issues is inevitably reduced.

In religious community, we create spaces in which our malleability can be increased, in part to open us to the possibility of becoming an ally with someone we might otherwise describe as “Other.” That’s really what Jesus the Rabbi was talking about when he used the story of the Samaritan to ask his own people, “Who is the friend?” Jews and Samaritans were historic enemies, so Jews would hardly expect that a Samaritan would find a Jew beaten by robbers and left for dead by the roadside, stop, bind the wounds, take the Jew to the nearest town, and pay for a room in which he could recover from the beating. The Rabbi invited people to consider who the beaten man’s allies were – Jews who passed by on the other side of the road, or the Samaritan who stopped to care for his enemy.

You may not care for the term “ally.” That word may have connotations for you that keep you from thinking that being an ally is a good thing. For me, an ally is someone who stops to help, breaks away from routines to be of service, works to understand someone else’s reality, and is willing to be with me as I deal with what it means to live here in western North Carolina as a white lesbian woman with a permanent disability.

Two weeks ago, I went to the UU congregation in Tryon, and talked about heroes who made difficult choices to make their little part of the world a better place. After the service, I met a woman named Polly, and she and I agreed to contact our local libraries about their holdings about GLBTQ people. I was interested in this because the week before I had looked up an author named Alison Bechdel, who has nearly a quarter of a million books in print, and has won a Lambda Literary Award. Her name was not in their catalogue, so I couldn’t find any trace of her new book, Fun Home.

I came back from Tryon and wrote to one of the reference librarians to ask why her books were not in the Henderson County library. He responded that first of all, they had purchased a copy of the book I wanted. He went on to say that according to their cataloguist, the term “gay” is more inclusive than the word “lesbian,” so I should look up “gay fiction” as the subject, rather than “lesbian fiction.” HMMMMM, I thought. Back to thinking of the term “mankind” as including women, to the time when the only pronouns in the blue hymnal were “he” and “him,” when I felt marginalized as a woman in a male-dominated culture. I wasn’t impressed. However, I’m also not masochistic, and I don’t, believe it or not, look for ways to put myself at risk. What is the right thing to do in these circumstances?

I told someone in this congregation about my experience, and about my plan to write to the librarian about his insensitivity to what I want to be called. He said, “I understand – well, I’m trying to understand. What’s the goal you’re working on? I hope you won’t take umbrage at the reference librarians – they are really good people, very helpful, in this part of the world. Since this isn’t my issue, how can I help? Where do we

go from here?” Then he stopped, looked worried, and said, “Uh oh. I’m taking a chance on screwing this up.”

There it is in a nutshell. He’s an ally, even though he’s a white heterosexual man. When the first words he uttered were “I’m trying to understand,” he left space for my reactions, and then offered a gentle nudge in the direction of working with the librarians instead of letting them know who wrong they were. He gave me the opportunity to let him know what I needed and wanted. He left space for me and my life, which certainly includes anger and frustration, and encouraged me to work with him and with this congregation to make the library better.

We can all do these things, no matter what the area of equity we want to focus on. I can be an ally to people of African heritage, and to people whose primary language is something other than English. Although I am what is called a “woman-born woman,” I can be an ally to someone who comes to understand her- or himself as a person who’s living in a wrongly gendered body. With my middle-class upbringing, I can be an ally to someone who lives what’s sometimes called a “hardscrabble life,” the working-class people who are nicked and dimed by the system, as Barbara Ehrenreich described them.

I need allies when I think about coming out to an influential African-American in Hendersonville, or to this librarian, or to the shop clerk who looks at my rainbow card and asks, “Is that a garden on your credit card?” I need to have a sense of your support as I deal with the never-ending process of coming out that’s part of my daily life.

In your life, is there something you’d like to find an ally for? Is there a way someone could meet you compassionately? Take a minute to consider whether you’d like to find, or be, an ally about something in your life. When the bell rings, turn to someone near you and take turns letting each other know that yes, you’d like an ally on an issue of equity, or yes, you’d like to be an ally on an issue of equity. We’ll have a minute of silence, then I’ll sing a little song written by lesbian Libby Roderick to invite you to share with one another.

[Sing “How Could Anyone. . .]

[Ring the bell signal it’s time to change speakers, and again to bring people back together]

In this congregation, we have retired people who are allies to young families. We have people who love candles and are willing not to light them in order to be allies to people who are sensitive to fragrances or smoke. We have people who open and close doors for those whose walkers, wheelchairs or scooters make it hard to maneuver around.

Sometimes we support one another in the work of being allies by wearing reminders of the communities of people affected by issues of marginalization or oppression. Some people wear small pieces of rainbow ribbon in their nametags. We have some of those ribbons today at the back of the sanctuary so you can pick one up. As you do so, you’ll be joining the allies who believe in the Solidarity Pledge, which asks you to “work for civil and human rights for all people, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals and the transgendered.”

This doesn’t mean a blanket acceptance of “anything goes.” The example this week of Mark Foley, announcing from an undisclosed rehab center that he is gay, presents a challenge to me – he’s a member of the GLBTQ community, apparently, yet his behavior in sending explicit messages to teen-age pages is completely unacceptable.

A romanticized and uninformed perspective on someone else's life isn't the right answer either – Native Americans are very familiar with people who think they are spiritual and connected with the earth while overlooking wrenching poverty, unemployment, and a shorter life expectancy than other people who live in the territory of the United States. It's not a wholehearted embrace that makes you an ally – it's a willingness to deal with complexity, moving from "patching up" to creating a new cultural fabric with equity as the warp and woof.

To quote from a book called Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, you become an ally when you:

- take responsibility for learning about the heritage, culture and experiences of people who experience marginalization or oppression, as well as about your own;
- acknowledge some of the unearned privileges you enjoy because of your group's status in this culture
- work to change privileges into rights for people who seek equity and justice
- commit yourself to taking action against social injustice in your own sphere of influence

It's all about the stories. We have the privilege today of hearing one more story, about UUFH member the Rev. Jim Allen. His wife, Jean Allen, will tell this story.

[Jean comes to the microphone. Here are her remarks]

" In his sermon last Sunday, Jim [McKinley] spoke of defining moments: those brief times when we know that something life-changing is happening and we are exactly where we need to be.

For me, such a moment came on the day of my husband's retirement dinner. Each retiree had been told he could have from three to five minutes to say anything he liked to the assembled ministers and their spouses.

Just before his turn came, I glanced over at the slip of paper he held in his hand, guessing that it held his notes about what he would say. When I saw what was written there, my heart began to pound and my pulse roared in my ears.

As Jim rose in his place at the table and began to speak, I was aware of no one else, nothing else.

"Our bishop once told us ministers that we were not called to be successful, only to be faithful," he said. "I have been faithful, but I have this grievance with my church: that I have had to tell two of my children they must go elsewhere. They can never experience full membership in this denomination. If they should request ordination, it would be denied to them because they are homosexuals."

Stunned silence filled the room, and gradually I became aware of shocked faces with mouths agape. Heart still pounding, I rose to stand beside him. Slowly and deliberately, I applauded. He'll get a standing ovation for that, I thought, even if it's from only one person.

The next few moments were a blur, but afterward I seemed to remember that others had joined in the applause. Not many, but some.

When the dinner was over, a couple we had known for several years — but only casually — approached us. The husband held out his hand and grasped Jim's.

“I can’t thank you enough for speaking out as you did,” he said. His voice trembled and nearly broke. “We learned not long ago that our son is gay and we didn’t know anyone we could talk to.”

So right there in the middle of the banquet hall, while the rest of the ministers and their spouses dispersed and the kitchen crew cleared tables around us, the four of us talked. On and on, for nearly an hour. When we finally parted, we embraced and promised to keep in touch. They are now active in the PFLAG chapter in Syracuse, NY.

That was nineteen years ago. Then, the idea of actually legalizing same-gender marriage was not yet on the radar screen for us. We know now that in addition to ordination, which would affect relatively few people, the right to marry the person of one’s own choosing is still “a dream deferred” for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, not only in most religious denominations, but in all but a pitifully few civil jurisdictions as well.

[Jean returns to her seat, next to her husband Jim]

We’re going to close our service today with hymn #1014, “Standing on the Side of Love.” I first heard this hymn at General Assembly, having been told during plenary sessions to stand repeatedly. I sighed when I heard the title, but then thought about how important it is to find creative ways to move beyond fear into inclusion. It’s a wonderful hymn, and after all, we stand together physically, emotionally, and spiritually as allies in the vital work of equity and justice. As we rise in body and spirit, may the “standing” part be understood as “being with,” together, in appreciation of all our lives.

Helen Bishop
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