Beyond the Comfort Zone

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel at The North Parish, Unitarian Universalist

January 11, 2015

The most interesting, exciting, and spirit-stretching part of our Sunday morning is not happening here, in the Meeting House, today. We’re all missing it-- the real action, the real adventure. I say this because right now a group of our 6th, 7th and 8th graders are doing a great thing-- a simple but great thing. They are stepping out of their comfort zone, and attending the Chinmaya Maruti Hindu Temple in Andover this morning.

They have gone through the doors, removed their shoes, found a place to put them among the hundreds of other shoes, and walked sock-footed into a different worshipping community. They are surrounded by people of Indian descent, by kids who speak Hindi, by the colors and sounds, rituals and habits of a different congregation.

Those of our youth who are light-skinned Anglo-Americans are sticking out in the darker-skinned crowd. For lunch they will sit at long tables among people they don’t know and eat food that is likely foreign to most of them. They are experiencing the morning as guests and as minorities. I am so curious to learn what they will say about it.

On Friday night, the action- the real spirit-stretching adventure- was at the meal center Cor Unum, in Lawrence, where a small crew from church served dinner to the crowd.

Was anyone here part of that crew? How did it go?

It can be hard to be up close to poverty on cold nights, can’t it? It makes you worry for people- for their safety and warmth and comfort. But I imagine it was good to serve the people good, hot food-- and worth leaving your own warm houses, your own comfort zone.
The truth is, it often takes some real motivation to leave the comfort of our own homes—our own circles, our own habits, our own assumptions, our own world view. I've heard it said that one reason why people like to come to this church is because it's a safe place full of like-minded people. In other words, it is comfortable.

We humans like to be comfortable! That's why we've created indoor plumbing, indoor heating and fuzzy fleece pajamas. I am very happy to have such comforts of life especially in winter's deep cold, and often find myself thinking of how many human beings lived without any of this. I find myself amazed, and yes—deeply grateful—that such basic comforts are a given in my life, yet enjoyed by such a small sliver of the total human population that has ever lived.

I am grateful for our comforts because well, I dislike being uncomfortable. Plus, there's a lot in our interconnected world and our busy lives that can be harsh and stressful.

There's an old saying that the minister's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Well, I disagree. We all need nurturing, and if it is lacking in your life, I invite you to seek it out this very week. Do something just for yourself to help chase any winter blues away or reach out to nurture someone else.

The trouble isn't comfort and nurture, the trouble is getting addicted to it. Think about it-- on a personal level, if we never leave our comfortable homes, we're likely to get depressed. And if we cling to our comfort zones, our happy spots, it is much harder to discover new things, meet new people, eat new food.

As a congregation, if we never leave the comfort of our sanctuary it can start to serve as one great echo-chamber. Or it may turn into a place where we shy away from anything controversial, anything we might disagree about, so no one has a chance to feel uncomfortable.
And spiritually, comfort zones can sometimes lead us toward complacency, self-absorption, egocentricity, and in the worst case scenarios, spiritual death. The Spirit, God, the Goddess, the call of human need are rarely found in the comfort zone, but call us, lead us away from it. The Buddha left his palace, Moses and Jesus went into the desert, Muhammed went to a cave on a mountain, King went to Memphis. All the real action is usually happening somewhere else.

The Rev. Ruth MacKenzie from Minneapolis Minnesota recently shared a sermon in which she shares a metaphor from the poet Mark Nepo about what it takes to leave the comfort zone. Often, it takes discomfort, like it takes discomfort for a chick to hatch from an egg. MacKenzie writes,

“In the moments before birth, the small hatchling has eaten all its food, and its growing body presses against every contour and curve of the shell. There is no more room. There is no more food. The chick hatches because its body is painfully cramped inside the world of the egg, and it is starving.

There is so much discomfort that the check is driven to peck its way into whatever is on the other side of the world, whatever is on the other side of safety, because there is nothing else to do and still survive. The world literally breaks apart. The chick eats bits of its own shell, and its body squeezes through the emerging cracks. Hatching is not graceful. There is wrestling and rolling around. There is crying and prying. There is exhaustion, and power naps. There is stumbling and trying to hold the head up while getting feet beneath the body. Hatching is not graceful... I think the chick would say; hatching is a necessity.”

When I read this, I remembered a game my daughter liked to play when she was younger that we called, simply, “Egg.” She would curl up in a ball under the blankets on her bed, pretending to be an egg—
Usually a dragon egg or a griffin egg, never a plain old chicken egg.
Then she would start to hatch- wiggling for a bit, then sticking out first one arm,
then another, one leg, the other, and finally emerging to be welcomed into the world.
We rehearsed this over and over and over again, morning after morning after morning- for
months. (Thankfully, you can play “Egg” with your eyes closed.)

Like her, I’d suggest we need to become experts at hatching-
practicing leaving our comfort zones again and again and again.
As we were reminded by the second reading about living in a post-racial world,
it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert-
twenty hours a week for about ten years.

Some of you are experts at leaving your comfort zone already.
Some of you do this every week when you come to church!
Think back to the first time you came here—
I bet many of you felt a bit weird, uneasy even,
coming in and sitting down among all these “church people”.
For others, the unease might be tied into issues of culture, class and ethnicity.

I remember a story one of you told me, and others,
about attending a dinner at another member’s house early on in her time here.
She said that when she walked into the house, which happened to be a very fine house,
she immediately thought, “These are not my people!”
She was simply not in her usual context.
Thankfully, she didn’t let that stop her from enjoying the dinner,
coming back to church or building relationships with those same people.

Two other members have told me- and I know there are more like this out there-
that their work as teachers in Lowell and Lawrence means that their daily contexts are
multicultural, multiethnic, and working class.
Coming to services here means leaving that comfort zone,
and it feels odd. The contrast is significant enough,
that they have to remind themselves that this is their place too- that they are Unitarian
Universalists and belong here too.
There is more diversity of background among us than meets the eye.

But unless we share our stories— in small circles, in large circles—
there is no way to learn about and honor the multiple truths about our lives.

Unless we share our stories, there is no way to show each other the way out
when its time to leave our comfortable home.

We do have a choice of course, to stay or go-
to stay in the shell, cramped, starving, dying.

Or we can start to break through to see what’s on the other side.

We can listen to our discomfort, and start to peck away at the habits, assumptions, world
views that have shaped our lives, our bodies, our egos, our inner spirits.

We can use our discomfort, use it to propel us to take the risk to emerge from the egg,
to rely on a new and larger world where there is enough air to breathe.

I'd suggest that right now,
our nation is feeling just this kind of discomfort and motivation.
The discomfort and motivation come from the loss of life,
and the lack of accountability for those losses.

I speak now of the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner
and 12 year old Tamir Rice at the hands of policemen,
and the lack of indictment from grand juries for those deaths, and all this represents.

The deaths have brought about lots of grieving and praying,
organizing and preaching in black churches, and calls for men to mentor boys.
They have brought about lots of protests, counter-protests
and arguments around the dinner table.

It has been sad but predictable, to see the usual polarizations:
people taking sides, feeling offended and outraged on opposite sides of the police line.
As the lines are drawn, there is little room for nuance or complexity.
As we heard in the first reading, we humans “are taught to think in either/or”,
and act as if “Truth is this- the rest false.”

Of course, such polarizations and demonizations are missing the point.
It's as if saying that— because you are angry about child abuse by priests
and angry about the system and the hierarchy that let them continue
to have access to children-- it means you believe all priests are bad.
The truth is, all decent priests, or ministers, or policemen
are deeply affected by such systems of power and abuse,
as they reduce the trust level for all of us.

Life embraces multiple truths.
One can be alarmed about police brutality, support policemen,
and want to figure out how to protect the lives of young black men and boys.
Just as one can be alarmed about abusive priests or clergy misconduct,
know wonderful priests or ministers,
and want to change the system so all children will be safe.

The extra challenge to the dialogue is that the whole subject of racism
brings up a lot of anxiety in our nation, and the more anxiety there is-
in a family, in a congregation, in a society-
the more we long for comfort, for the familiar, for certainty.
It is much harder to hang out in the space of not knowing.
It is much harder to listen to words and emotions and stories
that might find painful echo in our own...
and perhaps even harder to listen to those words and emotions-
the intense grief and anger- when the stories are different than our own.
Anglo-Americans can find it difficult to listen to the anger and grief of black Americans.
But we must listen, listen, listen- even while disagreeing or feeling discomfort.

I’d suggest, that place of discomfort is exactly where we need to be,
and this is the work we need to do.
People who teach yoga or work with anxious children know that without facing into the
discomfort, there is no progress. Avoidance leads us nowhere.
The church needs to be part of the conversation about racism and white privilege-
for the healing of our people, the rectifying of our history,
the possibility of our future... and to stop the dying.

As Rev. Mackenzie writes,

“This egg we’re all living in is getting mighty tight:
This egg of racism and white privilege,
this social construct that was made up centuries ago
and that we are living out to devastating effect today.
The construct, the egg, says white skin, white ways of looking at things,
white ways of doing things are normal, are fully human.
Other expressions of skin tone, culture and ways of viewing the world
are somehow a little less, justifying all manner and forms of inequity...

“Racism is not the stupid remark your great uncle makes
and causes everyone to squirm around the dinner table.”
Racism is the air we breathe, as Dr. Heather Hackman puts it.
It is a construct in which we all live, that weaves its way through economics,
policing, education, and every life...

Friends, we are all in this egg, this racialized egg.
We didn’t construct it. We’re just in it together, some to life-stressing,
life-threatening disadvantage, and others to life-enhancing advantage.
But regardless of where we are positioned in the egg, we are all starving.”

Starving, many of us come here, longing for the Beloved Community
of which Dr. King spoke.
But we know we can’t get there without hearing and telling the often painful stories about
the ways racism and classism have shaped our country and our own lives.

Now, I’m no expert in this.
Thankfully, some of you are, and there are many Unitarian Universalists
who have made it their ministry to help congregations hatch out of their shells.
People like the Rev. Parisa Parsa and the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed
can guide us to learn from our history, learn about cultural assumptions,
and bring us tools to help us hatch.
The Inclusion and Multicultural Competencies group hopes to be able to invite
one of them to join us next year.

I can guarantee there will be discomfort, disagreement, mis-steps and mistakes
when we engage in this conversation, this work.
But perhaps we can learn to trust the discomfort, to expect it, even look forward to it. The goal then becomes something far more powerful than finding a place to feel comfortable and safe.

Our goal will become creating a place where we can feel *uncomfortable* and safe at the same time. Let me say that again: We’ll know we’re on the right path when we can feel *uncomfortable and safe*. It’s a lot like sitting in one of our hard-backed pews—uncomfortable, *and* safe.

I believe North Parish can be such a place, a place where we can learn to tolerate the discomfort of honest talk about racism and classism. I believe this because a bunch of you have been practicing how to listen, how to meditate and pray and to breathe, how to be honest and vulnerable and forgiving for years, even decades. It may take all of our skills, but, good people, *we’ve got this*.

So for those of you for whom the setting of North Parish is not a comfort zone, I invite you to hang in there with us. We need you, and besides—*if* you’ve been here even just once, you’re automatically part of our great extended family. We know that just coming into this Meeting House is a big stretch for a lot of people. It’s an imposing building that exudes old history and privilege and the echoing words of founding fathers of the town. But it can also be an incubator for Spirit to do her wild work, to shape a different future where all are more connected and free.

And for those of you who are oh-so-comfortable here, like myself, here’s a reminder: unless we move beyond the comfort zone of this Meeting House, we’re not going to succeed in making our circle much wider. It’s not going to happen by waiting for people to join us here.

So I invite us this month to make a choice to leave our comfort zones. Join us in Lawrence for the New Jim Crow discussion or to clean Cor Unum on Martin Luther King weekend.
Or go somewhere new on your own... cross a border you don’t usually cross and then just notice how you feel there- the more uncomfortable, the better. Then come back and tell me, tell us what you’ve learned. We’ll be waiting to hear your good news.

Amen.

*Benediction, by the Rev. Joseph M. Cherry*

“If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves, we must be bold enough to step into our discomfort, brave enough to be clumsy there, loving enough to forgive ourselves and others.

*May we, as a people of faith, be granted the strength to be so bold, so brace, and so loving.”*