

# “People Like Us”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Reflection by Margaret Kohr

Last month I had not one but two epiphanies.

The first happened at my Saturday yoga class.

One pose I struggle with is bridge pose. Lying on your back, you gradually lift your entire body while pressing down on your feet and shoulders to form an arc or bridge. The instructor guided us gently through the pose. “Remember”, she said, “it is not about how high you can lift – it is about how wide you can open your heart centre.”

That was my epiphany moment – opening the heart centre *is what my life is about*... And that is surely why I struggle with this pose. Because opening and continuing to open my heart centre will always require more of a stretch.

Although this epiphany happened during yoga, it was thanks to First that I recognized it as the articulation of the spiritual journey I am on, one that I didn’t even know existed until I came here.

Like many of you, I wanted my children to experience a liberal religious education. My own spiritual needs were not on my radar that first Sunday. But from the moment I joined in the words of our congregational covenant I knew I had found a like minded community. One Sunday has become 15 years of Sundays – and so much more.

For me, volunteering seemed the best way to meet people and to feel connected. Over the years as I participated in many different activities, I noticed I was acting differently-- more meaningfully-- in all areas of my life. Indeed, my heart centre was beginning to open.

What started as a prosaic way to find my place here had evolved into the path of my spiritual journey.

When I became a member of the Board of Trustees last year, I saw this as a great chance to use my administrative experience while learning about the business side of this place. Pretty cut and dried. Once again, spiritual growth was not on my radar.

But serving in the capacity of trustee for this congregation, to the best of my ability, with others who are striving to do the same has brought me some of the most significant insights in my spiritual journey.

Each month, as we confront the planned and the unexpected at our meetings, I am struck by how seriously we discuss, reflect and consider the outcomes of the decisions being taken. Each month I am thinking more carefully, becoming less quick to judge. Each month I am growing a bit more understanding of myself and others. Each month I am opening my heart centre.

Which brings me to my second epiphany. During our last Board meeting, after we had reached a decision that required sensitivity and grace, I realized that *everything* I do here, from stuffing envelopes, to teaching RE, to becoming a lay chaplain, to serving on the Board – is one more step on my spiritual path. *Everything* I do here stretches my heart centre – and more than ever I am open to the possibilities.

## **Meditation Words**

from *What We All Long For* by Torontonion Dionne Brand

Mornings are like that on the subway trains — everyone having left their sovereign houses and apartments and rooms to enter the crossroads of the city, they first try at not letting the city touch them, holding onto the meager privacy of a city with three million people. But eventually they're disrupted like this. Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren't anonymous at all. You are common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specs of dirt, so many atoms of materiality....

What floats in the air on a subway train like this is chance. People stand and sit with the thin magnetic film of their life wrapped around them. They think they

are safe, but they know they are not. Any minute you can crash into someone else's life, and if you are lucky it is good, it is like walking on light.

There are Italian neighborhoods, and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city; there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones, and Korean ones, and African ones. Name a region on the planet and there's someone from there, here. All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care. Because that genealogy is willfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself. They'd only have to look, but it could be that what they know hurts them already, and what if they found out something even more damaging? These are people who are used to the earth beneath them shifting, and they all want it to stop—and if that means that they must pretend to know nothing, well, that's the sacrifice they make.

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Columbian cafe owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calebrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers.

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated—women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads. . . In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it's hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension.

**Reading**                    **from “We Must Change” by Rosemary Bray-McNatt**

*Our reading, by the Reverend Rosemary Bray-McNatt, comes from an address she delivered to a gathering of ministers in 2009. Rosemary is the minister of 4<sup>th</sup> Universalist on Manhattan's Upper West Side.*

My sons are third-generation Unitarian Universalists.

After his beautiful and moving Coming of Age ceremony at our congregation, my older son, Allen, asked me whether I would be offended if he joined another religion when he grew up.

Now, as his mother, I couldn't possibly be offended.

My husband and I have raised our children to know that they must find their own way, even as we have been clear about what path we follow as Unitarian Universalists.

We want him to feel free to be the spiritual seeker he has been raised to be.

On the other hand, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I was internally screaming, "YES, I'm offended! Just what do you think I've been doing around here?"

When I asked him why he thought it would be better to be a different religion, he said, "It's not that I don't like being a UU.

"I am just tired of being the only black kid in the youth group, and the only black kid at camp, and the only black kid everywhere."

He loves our faith, but he is lonely.

Even attending a loving church where your mother is one of the twenty-four senior ministers of colour in the entire Unitarian Universalist movement cannot save you from the truth of your situation.

It would be great if those of us who are ministers of colour, and Latino/Latina ministers, and Asian/Pacific Island ministers, and multiracial ministers, were automatic magnets for diversity in our congregations. It surely would make raising my sons easier.

It would be fabulous if the handful of us who do this work in the parish had grasped the magic formula after the hard years spent in the laboratories of our own congregations. But the truth is that most of us haven't.

I know I haven't, even after nearly nine years in New York City, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the world.

But even to imagine that we alone could figure it out in our UU congregations would be attributing far more power to us as ministers than we have, and far less power than we should to the culture of our congregations itself.

As we continue to parse this complex issue,

we forget at our peril that even topics as innocuous as what color to paint the [washroom] walls continue to fall victim to the realities of our congregational systems, to our habits of being, and to the inordinate length of what we in the parish measure as church time.

We also underestimate the reality of resistance in our congregations, a resistance rooted not so much in racism as in matters of class and culture.

We forget when we talk about cultural competence in ministry, or cultural change in ministry, that it is not just those other people who have a culture. Unitarian Universalist congregations have a culture[, too].

Consider who many of us are, and who we are pretty proud about being, no matter what our race or ethnicity.

Many of us are the people who brag about not owning televisions because there is nothing worth watching, unless it is [educational tv].

Many of us are the people who refuse to listen to popular music because it is misogynistic and violent, and more than a few of us regard rap music as nothing more than noise and confusion. . . .

Many of us are unapologetic nature lovers. . .  
Many of us eat locally, we shop at farmer's markets, and we would never be caught in Wal-Mart, unless it was a dire emergency.

Many of us do look ahead in our hymnal to see whether we agree with the words, and forget that the person sitting next to us may need exactly the words we are refusing to sing.

Most of all, many of us love our UU congregations because they represent for us places of respite and peace and sanctuary.

How, then, do we encounter those whose experience of church is different, whose experience of the holy is different, who find the truth of their lives in music from T.I. and Naz, in the Black Eyed Peas and A Tribe Called Quest?

Where do they enter into the culture of Unitarian Universalist religious community?

How do people like me, proficient in navigating the worlds of African American identity, learn to make room for the experiences of immigrant people whose names I have not yet learned to say?

How do we—all of us—convert our ignorance into wisdom, manage both our shame and our earnestness, both our resistance and our desire to know?

### **Sermon: “People Like Us”**

Three and a half years ago,  
as Bob and I were packing up our lives in Boston to move to Toronto,  
I was amazed at how much sorting and sifting and shedding was involved.

One of the biggest chores for me involved paring down my own library.

Painful as it was, I parted with scores of books.

Some donated to the city library, some to the church,  
and the rest deposited in the large metal book bin  
in the parking lot of our local supermarket.

On the morning I was heaving boxes of books into the bin,  
I was startled by the tell-tale sounds  
of screeching tires and scrunching metal.

Just a few metres away from where I stood, two SUVs collided.  
Both drivers hopped out and instantly began yelling at the other.  
Fingers wagged, and expletives filled the air.  
Husbands were called, as well as the police.

While quietly continuing to empty my books into the bin,  
I watched the scene unfold,  
mostly because at that volume, I couldn't help but be involved,  
but also in case I was called upon to testify in a court of law

if things got out of hand—which certainly seemed possible.

The crowning moment came when, for insurance purposes,  
the two drivers got around to exchanging their contact information.

Each woman in a whirl of fury,  
commanded the other to hand over her address.

And, then, in an instant, everything changed.

They exchanged their slips of paper, and to the horror of each,  
discovered that they not only lived on the very same street,  
but only a few doors apart.

Their anger morphed into an awkward awareness.

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The timeless concerns of the religious life have always had a way  
of circling back to the central question of just who is our neighbour.

In matters of life and death, insult and injury,  
justice, equality, compassion, and peace,  
we are asked over and over again who are our neighbours  
and what responsibilities we have to them.

It is a question that has been quietly on my heart  
since arriving here to be your minister.

In this magnificent city, at this moment in time,  
I often wonder just who are our neighbours.

I wonder if they're the people who've recently moved into the tower next door,  
or the boys who attend Upper Canada College, just up Avenue Road?

I wonder if they're the men who live in the Native Men's Residence on  
Vaughan Road, or the women, who've come from all over the Earth,  
and now work the deli and the bakery and the cash at the Loblaw's on St. Clair?

I wonder if they're the people who own the gracious homes surrounding us, or the homeless people who sleep in Sir Winston Churchill Park?

Ultimately, of course, it's not a question of either/or.

There is only one real answer—  
that each and all of these people are our neighbours.

That each and all are people of inherent worth and dignity,  
that each and all are part of the interdependent web  
within which we, as a congregation, are situated.

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Though we are located, here, at the edge of Forest Hill,  
our congregation isn't really *of* Forest Hill—  
at least not with the overt air of exclusivity  
that this neighbourhood might convey.

Truth be told, the area around us is actually more diverse  
than its reputation might readily reveal.

Within a fairly short walk of this building  
can be found the clear extremes of poverty and privilege,  
of vulnerability and power, of suffering and success.

What might be less clear, on such a walk, is that happiness and despair don't  
directly correlate with one's net worth, status or address.

That means there is the opportunity for ministry around us in every direction—  
to the “down-and-out,” as well as the “up-and-out.”

(It's worth remembering that the injured man who was helped  
by the Good Samaritan was also one of the wealthiest people in the village.)

Now, to be clear, I'm not advocating that we launch a special outreach to the  
upper classes of Toronto.

Some would say we've already got that base well-covered.



And, there's certainly some truth to that.

In surveys of religious demographics, Unitarian Universalists consistently appear at or very near the top in the categories of household income and level of education.

For the better part of two centuries, the Unitarian side of our family has had a bit of a reputation for being a religion of the elite—though this was truer in 19<sup>th</sup> century Boston than anywhere else.

In fact, our direct forebears in Britain were usually of the working or merchant classes, as were many of the founders of this congregation.

Still, even with our congregation's humbler roots, it's hard to deny that we, by many if not most measures, are, today, a relatively privileged people.

And, with that comes a certain culture.

A culture not particularly comfortable talking about class.

A culture that is, ironically, sometimes hostile toward people of any social status higher than our own.

A culture that can easily obscure the fact that there is actually a genuine diversity of backgrounds amongst us—with respect to our education, our experience, our financial situation, and our life's work.

And, a culture that, if we're not careful, can be intimidating and alienating—to people at opposite ends of the class spectrum.

I say this out of my own experience.

Some twenty years ago, when I first walked into a UU congregation, I was a financially struggling waiter, sporadically putting myself through school at an inner-city community college.

After my earliest attempts at coffee hour—

with all the well-intentioned questions that felt loaded with class-based assumptions about what a person my age should be doing with his life—I was convinced I wasn't qualified to be a Unitarian Universalist.

I now know that isn't and wasn't true.

But it took many years before I could really believe it.  
And, frankly, getting a couple of Ivy League degrees along the way didn't hurt.

\* \* \*

I must tell you that I became a minister in this tradition because I believe ours is a faith with the power to transform the world.

When I look out at the problems we face on this planet, I find that so many of them, at their deepest roots, are profoundly spiritual.

Problems that arise from a broken connection—a broken covenant—with the earth, with each other, and with the sacred trust of life itself.

I am a Unitarian Universalist today because this faith offers the most compelling path I know for the healing of the world—this world, in the here and the now—through that slow and steady stretching of the heart that Margaret spoke of earlier.

I am a minister in this tradition because I unabashedly believe that the world needs a lot more Unitarian Universalism.

And, yet, in my moments of deepest despair, when I bump up against our limitations, I find myself wondering if Unitarian Universalism really is only a faith for witty, charming, overly-educated, mostly white, upper-middle class people.

As much as I love and treasure each one of you who fits that profile (which, I should point out, hits pretty close to home!), I believe this faith will only realise its truest, transformative potential when we have managed to draw wider the circle of our embrace.

When we have overcome the barriers of class that perpetuate the myth

that this is a faith for the privileged few.

I don't know about you, but I long for the day when The Beloved Community means everyone.

I long for the day when the guy repairing my car hums "Spirit of Life," while he goes about his work, and the young woman who bags my groceries wears a chalice necklace around her neck.

\* \* \*

I feel so strongly about this because  
I so desperately needed this faith when I was a young waiter trying to sort through deeply confounding questions about the meaning of my life.

And, I feel so strongly about this still,  
because I believe so many of our neighbours are in need of this faith, too,  
whether they live upstairs from here,  
or sleep out back in our Secret Garden because they have no home.

To build up the vision of the Beloved Community means that the abiding values of Unitarian Universalism must know no bounds.

The second principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

As we strive on to make that principle real in the living of our lives,  
it will require that we stretch our hearts to make room  
for those who may seem very different from ourselves.

But, may we always stretch with gladness and with gratitude,  
knowing that a circle so wide has plenty of room—  
even for people just like us.

Blessed Be.

Amen.

**Closing Words**

This is the mission of our faith:  
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;  
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;  
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;  
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

- Rev. William Schulz