

“Inclusivity and Welcoming Congregation”

Rev. Danielle Webber

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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These words are from Patrick S. Cheng, from the introduction of his book *Rainbow Theology – Bridging Race, Sexuality and Spirit*.

When I was growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1970s and 80s, I looked forward each year to the annual network television broadcast of The Wizard of Oz. My favourite part of the movie was when it transitioned from black and white to dazzling Technicolor. The first part of the movie, when Dorothy and Toto are transported over the rainbow, however, they step out of their monochromatic house into the multicolored hues of Munchkinland. Dorothy is greeted by Glenda, the Good Witch of the South, and Glenda urges the Munchkins to “come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Somehow I imagined that my own coming out process as a gay man would be just like Dorothy and Toto’s transition from black and white into technicolor. After all, gay men loved The Wizard of Oz and even called themselves “friends of Dorothy.” That is, I would be transported from the closet – a monochromatic black and white space – onto a fabulous rainbow-colored space that was the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer community.

Unfortunately my coming out process as a gay man was far less fabulous than I had imagined. This was due in large part to the fact that I am also an Asian American man. I quickly found that a person of color within the LGBTIQ community posed its own set of challenges. When I came out of the closet in the mid – 1980s in college I thought I was a unicorn. That is I thought that I was a one-of-a-kind mythical creature because everyone I knew in the gay community was white, and everyone I knew in the Asian American community was straight.

Not only did I not know other LGBTIQ people of color, but I was actively excluded from parts of gay culture. When I was at a gay bar in Washington D.C., with my white gay friends from college, I was asked to show several forms of identification, whereas my friends were not. And once I was allowed inside the bar, I felt completely invisible. Nobody talked to me or said hello. So much for being “somewhere over the rainbow.” I was stuck in a monochromatic world.

Sermon:

This past fall Canadian Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist Congregations participated in Inclusivity Forums, roundtable conversations, and congregational dialogue around the proposed 8th principle. A year ago, in May 2021, at The Canadian Unitarian Council’s Annual General meeting, a delegate requested the immediate adoption of the proposed 8th Principle. After much back and forth at the meeting, an unanticipated vote and approval of the proposal happened. And then a week later, an announcement was made that the vote was invalid. It was a whirlwind of events and emotion over the weeks after the adoption, and announcement of it being invalid. The staff at the CUC then spent the summer months preparing inclusivity forums, roundtable conversation, and a process through which congregations could use to adopt the

principle on an individual basis. In November a second vote happened, and the 8th Principle was adopted at a national level. "We affirm and promote Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions."

Much of the preliminary workshops, and conversations around this adoption had to do with the individual pieces of the Principle – "what do we mean by accountably?", "Who is defining racism?" "what are systemic barriers?" Much of the conversation that happened throughout those 6 months, and after the adoption on November 27th focused on the logistics of the Principle, focused on wordsmithing and whether or not the statement was a principle, in the say way that the other 7 Principles were.

As a member of staff at the Canadian Unitarian Council, I had a sense of relief when the principle was adopted, because I would be able to stop focusing on the details surrounding the vote, and start focusing on the "hows" of the process. How do we remove systemic barriers? How do we identify them? How do we widen our circle of inclusion. I wouldn't compare this transition to that of the one described from *The Wizard of Oz*. It wasn't that we were moving from a space of monochromatic dull exclusion into a world of technicolor inclusivity. But I was looking forward to the shift in focus, away from adoption and toward action.

UU congregations have put a lot of effort towards widening their circles of inclusion, when it comes to supporting LGBTQ+ communities. And this congregation, First Toronto, has been at the cutting edge of a lot of this work, especially in the 90s and early 2000s. And yet I would argue that there is still so much that needs to be done, some much work on inclusion that can be done, in terms of the queer community.

Homophobia, a prejudice against gay individuals, has been one of the biggest hurdles that was overcome with the development of the Welcoming Congregations program, first conceived in 1989 at the UUA's General Assembly. "Although the UUA had been on record since 1970 as supporting the rights and worth of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons, the lived experience of these people in UU congregations spoke a different, painful truth." The original handbook was published in 1990, with updates made in 1995, 1999, and 2002, with the final update including workshops entitled "racism and homophobia/Heterosexism", "the radical right", "bisexuality and biphobia" and "transgender identity: what it means."

I wonder if one of the largest insight achieved from the Welcoming Congregation handbook and program, was the realization that heteronormativity, or the assumption that everyone is straight, was losing its power within our communities. The celebration of same sex unions, the recognition of Pride month, and the witnessing of relationships outside of the monochromatic norms that previous eclipsed our world view became part of our Unitarian Universalist identity.

The Welcoming Congregation Handbook was discontinued in 2014, after having no updates for 12 years. There are so many resources for Unitarian Universalist congregations to continue the

work of becoming welcoming congregations. But perhaps congregations believe that they have already achieved that layer of inclusion.

As was made clear in our reading from Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng, there are many different layers present when talking about finding inclusion, and welcome in any community. And perhaps we, as UU Communities, have done work around heteronormativity, but have we created a way to overcome the same hurdles when we consider cis-normativity, the assumption that cisgender is the norm. I know that Toronto first has also worked on this aspect of welcoming, I was an intern in this congregation when the signs were installed on the washrooms encouraging people to use the bathroom that best suited their gender identity.

What about when a person's gender expression doesn't jive with their gender identity? Or when a person's pronouns don't appear to fit with their expression? Have we created spaces where individuals feel welcome to bring the entirety of their humanity? Where the entirety of their humanity will be celebrated?

This past December I volunteered my partner Adam, and I to participate in one of the Inclusivity Forums that were created and facilitated by Erin Horvath and Amber Bellemare from the CUC. The topic of the forum was Diverse Relationships and Families. Adam is a trans man, he began his transition in 2008, and I was hoping that we would be able to share the experience of what it means to be a straight – passing couple. What it means to be witnessed as heterosexual, and how harmful it can be when assumptions are made about this. In particular I wanted people to know how hurtful it was to assume that Adam and I could conceive children whenever we chose to do so, but also the other myriad of assumptions that we make about hetero couples, and cis individuals.

What really came through our interview, however, was much more focused on my understanding of our principles, and what it means to me to be Unitarian Universalist. The beginning of our relationship (more than 5 years ago now), much like the beginning of any relationship, focused on learning about the other person, and trying to understand who each of us were as human beings, how we wanted to be perceived as individuals, how we wanted to be witnessed within the world.

Being able to offer to another person the perception that they long for, the witness of self that they are attempting to put forward, can be one of the most sacred acts that we can offer each other. To be able to witness a person as they wish to be seen, to be able to offer to someone the chance at figuring out who and how they want to be within the world, allows us to create a space where everyone is every part of that person is welcome.

Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng speaks to the creation of this space within his book, *Rainbow Theology*. His research and theological reflections lift up the intersectionality of race and sexuality, and how that intersectionality can create a new way through which Christians can understand spirituality. That there is a broader way in which individuals experience the world, and we can use that experience to critique how spirituality has been perceived and leveraged in the past. In the summary of his book, Cheng states “ Simply put, rainbow theology is a theology that is

written by and for LGBTIQ people of color. It is a theology that fully embraces the beautiful hues of race and ethnicity in an LGBTIQ community that is predominately white. It is also a theology that fully embraces the variety of sexualities and gender identities in communities of color that are predominantly straight and cisgender. And, rainbow theology is a broader methodology and critique that can be applied to all forms of theological reflection.”

And while I agree that there is something particular about the intersection of sexuality and race, I also want to lift up that there are unique perspectives, and powerful experiences at every intersection of our identities. As we weave in the understandings of class, disability, and age into the intersections of sexuality, gender identities, and race we move closer and closer to perceiving the technicolor world.

Not only is there the brilliance of technicolour available to us, as we continue to expand our understandings of welcome, and of inclusion. But I believe that Unitarian Universalism and Unitarian Universalists have a really unique opportunity to share our own theology, expressed in our principles. When combined, and expressed together The inherent worth and dignity of every human being, alongside the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, create this incredible opening for the witnessing of humanity.

I believe that at the crux of these two principles might be part of the work that is required as we move towards achieving our 8th principle. The inherent worth and dignity of every human being, and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We combine these two principles together we create the opportunity to witness someone as the search for their truth, and offer them the worth, and dignity that they crave while searching for their identity. Not only is there beauty in the diversity that we continue to search for, but there is beauty to be witnessed on the never ending road to discovering our own truths.