

Martha Postlewaite wrote these words.

*Do not try to save the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create a clearing
in the dense forest of your life
and wait there patiently,
until the song that is your life falls
into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself to this world*

so worthy of rescue.

-Clearing by Martha Postlewaite

I have a friend and colleague who helps educate congregations and other organizations on Pre-emptive radical hospitality. She describes the work this way "I join with people to create environments within which people can learn and grow and change. What I do is made up of hard work and relational magic." I like these two quotes because I think that when we as a congregation are at our best what we do, what we live, what we practice is relational magic and making space. And there is tension between those two - space and relation. -

Unitarian Universalism has been described as a faith of attraction and although that is true I struggle a little with that choice of words. I may be splitting hairs here but

the process of attraction has in it some point where we the congregation make ourselves different in order to draw people in. And that kind of implies that we will be trying to guess what people want and then make that happen. For me that is a kind of reactionary planning. Attraction to me implies that we are trying to make ourselves someone we are not.

Don't get me wrong - I want to see more people involved in this congregation. I want to see the people involved in this congregation more deeply involved. I want to see this congregation continue to make a difference in people's lives. I want us to grow - not just in numbers but in spiritual depth, in vibrancy, in joy, in caring, in community presence. I want to experience people saying "Oh yeah I hear of First UU they show up" And I do believe that we are not perfect there are ways that we can change and should change and become better.

But when what we practice is relational magic then I think we move from being attractive to being hospitable. We move to be inviting. It might be a small difference but think about the difference between invitation and attraction.

Imagine that you were planning a party and you wanted your friends to come. Imagine that it is a party for a particularly special occasion - your birthday. If you practiced attraction you might put a big sign on the outside of your house that said "Hey it's my birthday come have some cake!" And that can be done. If I saw that sign I would be intrigued but I also might wonder if that person really meant that I should come over or perhaps that was meant for someone else.

I would guess that most of us when planning a special party would instead call up,

or email, or text, or even mail invitations to particular people. It might be something like “Hey it’s my birthday on Friday come to my house and have some cake it will be fun I’d love to see you there you’re one of my bestest friends.” If I received that invitation I would feel really special.

It’s the difference between putting an announcement in our weekly newsletter - “Hey we need ushers call the office if you are interested.” And having Lucy Marr call you up and you hear her say, “Hey I know that you have been part of our congregation for awhile. It would be great to have you help out by being an usher. It’s not hard we have folks who can walk you through it.” When I was a Director of Religious Education and I was working with the teenz I would ask them who they would want for advisors, who were the cool adults. I’d get their list and then I would go to down the list and ask this way, “You know the teenz said they would love to have you as an advisor they said you were pretty cool - would you be interested?” Most adults said yes - who doesn’t want to be one of the cool adults.

I think of invitation as finding out what our strengths are, finding out how to be our best selves, and then asking folks to join in that.

When we invite people to something I think there is a process of preparation. Sometimes that means that we run through our house and throw the clutter in closets and behind couches and under beds. Hoping against hope that when folks show up the house looks OK. It happens. But when we are really being intentional about being invitational we think about and prepare our space and ourselves for others. We are doing that here. We are fixing the roof. We will be fixing the water problem in Fellowship Hall. And then we will be able to spiff up

the space. Clean it up give it some fresh paint make it hospitable to long time folks and to newcomers.

Henri Nouwen said

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit" --

That kind of hospitality takes work it doesn't just happen. If I run around my house throwing things in closets and under beds I am making room I am preparing but not in a really hospitable way. It works better when we are intentional about making a space for the other.

And we UUs we value different voices and diversity of people and yet we struggle to remain open enough and prepared to welcome those who are different.

I like the way our chalice circles do it. Peggy Flanders told me that in her group they keep an empty chair in anticipation that someone one new will come. It is their way of practicing hospitality a visible reminder that the

circle is not closed. And here is your invite. We have three chalice circles this year. Each meets once a month, one on Sunday, one on Monday evening, and one on Wednesday afternoon. These are folks who gather together in a covenanted group to discuss deep questions; sometimes it is off a sermon I gave. And more than anything they offer a small group within which you can make connections and friends and find a place where people smile when you walk through the door and goodness knows we all can use that.

Those smiles help because invitation is risky. What if the invitation doesn't work? One of my children once had a birthday party where literally no one showed up. Do you ever get that nervous feeling before people come over to your house, do we have enough food, is the bathroom clean, what if they get lost, will they show, what if no one has fun?

To invite is to be vulnerable and to be vulnerable is hard, and scary and raises anxiety. I want to challenge this congregation that this year we take the invitation to the next level. We've already started - our sandwich Board is standing out on Nottingham road. We are fixing our roof and will be fixing our water leakage problem - taking on the task of spiffing up fellowship hall to make it a bit more inviting. We, and by that I really mean you because I had very little to do with it - will be marching in the Westcott festival next Sunday. And here is another invite - come along and join us. We are going to have fun. There will be kazoos and tattoos - although not permanent ones. We will be there letting folks know that we are here. We will be there inviting folks to check us out. Those are great

things let's take a moment and celebrate (lead applause).

Do you know that our RE program is growing? Last year we had five age grouping, five classes. This year we have six. This goes against the national trend - this goes against the trend in Syracuse. Growing Re programs need adults to guide these children. I invite you to take that risk be that adult, who shows up, be that adult who supports our children.

And maybe you are brand new here not ready to take on a long-term commitment that's fair. I invite you to join our Facebook group. Follow us on twitter. Join us for a cup of coffee after service those are doable things. We welcome you here.

But what else. I want to invite you to risk. Maybe you have one of those crazy ideas - like putting a Standing on the Side of Love banner in one of our windows so that it could be seen from the road. Maybe you would like to hear different kind of music, or maybe you would like to try singing a solo, maybe you want to see us out in the community. Maybe this is just my crazy idea but let's risk making mistakes. Let's risk bringing our whole selves into this congregation.