

Living in Syracuse one might think that Unitarian Universalists are super good at being welcoming and accepting of trans, non binary folk and the LGBTQ community in general. We here at First UU do a pretty good job of being welcoming to all people, we just hosted the Building Beloved Community Beyond the Binary conference. We had over 100 people here most were not from this congregation, all were passionate about being trans rights. We continue to reach out in gentle ways to LGBTQ groups so that we can be allies and perhaps a spiritual home for folks. May Memorial has for the past two years had an interim minister, Rev. Sunshine Wolf, who is trans. So here in this back eddy we call Syracuse it can seem as if the whole UU world is open and welcoming. Certainly we are more than many mainline denominations, but we also have had a not so great history and we still have work to do. In a 2015, right after the supreme court ruling that affirmed marriage equality, an article in Religion news service listed Unitarian Universalism w as the most accepting of homosexuality and most affirmative of the marriage equality ruling by the Supreme Court. <https://religionnews.com/2015/06/30/ranking-churches-on-acceptance-of-homosexuality-plus-their-reactions-to-scotus-ruling/> We even outranked atheist and agnostics. How is it we got to a place where we are out in front of the other Religious organizations? Because we UUs we have not always been very good at fighting for LGBTQ rights. Here is Syracuse we might loose sight of that.

I'd like to look back in our history a little bit to answer that question. In 1961 a set of six principles was adopted by our new denomination. The third read 3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships. In the 70s and early 80s there was a push to update our principles. The women's movement was having an impact and it was clear that the language of our principles was

sexist. Through a long process our current seven principles got adopted in 1984 and the first one first on the list was, “We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That shift in language is important - “supreme worth of every human personality” was replaced by “inherent worth and dignity of **every** person”. We didn’t say every man, we didn’t say every smart person, we did not say every person who graduated from college, we said and say and mean every person. Words can mean different things to different people but to me I hear a shift away from a hierarchy of value to a recognition that each person, each of us, is valuable in and of ourselves, and it is something that we don’t have to earn. You don’t have to have the right personality, the right job, the right gender, the right orientation. Whoever you are however you love whatever you do you are valuable.

This was big - our UU women pushed us to have a more open attitude. And so I think it is not simply coincident that we also moved during this time to a more open stance on homosexuality and on gender. It had already begun even before our women got us to rewrite our principles.

In 1980, a General Assembly resolution urged the UUA to assist in the settlement of lesbian, gay, and bisexual religious leaders. The adoption of the new seven principles in 1984 pushed that forward. Trans gender was not a term that existed at that time. The movement was just beginning. And the term cisgender, meaning that ones lived gender agrees with the gender you were assigned at birth, was even further from people’s imaginations. Our language has come so far and has so far to go.

This was an era where we were really trying to find ways to be more affirming, more inclusive. This is important for a couple of reasons. First and foremost it is

important for folks in the LGBTQ community period. And if that were the only reason for the importance that would be enough. Because there is no good reason to discriminate against someone for their orientation or their gender. Period Full stop.

I think it is also important because we are a fairly young denomination. We are the consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalist in 1961. Up until that time the two denominations had been part of the liberal Christian movement to more or less degrees. And often they were part of a push back against Christianity. This means that in many ways we are rooted in a reaction to the powers that be. That is understandable but that is not enough to hold a denomination together. This movement in the 80s to expand our welcome and affirmation of people helped to move us away from being a reaction against something, in this case Christianity, and moved us toward being a denomination that has a value of love and acceptance at its very core. I think we are still struggling with this. Or at least there is still tension around this. My prayer for us UUs, for our denomination, is that that the tension is a creative tension and not a destructive one.

This movement away from Christianity is important in our movement toward being more welcoming and more inclusive. Christianity as it has been lived out in the western world, at least, has been a highly colonizing religion. And in that colonization forced people to fit into the tight categories of male and female, white and heterosexual thereby supporting white patriarchy. I love my Christian faith but I also know that the Christian church has a horrible history of loving people, of welcoming people as they are of celebrating people. And so it is incredibly important to note that as we move away from institutional Christianity we have been able to be more welcoming and affirming.

Bear Bergman in his keynote described it this way: (the parking lot metaphor.

Anything that breaks up the colonisation helps to make it possible for the flowers to bloom

And so beginning in the eighties or there about we started the work of being welcoming to Gays and Lesbians and Bi-sexuals. I have spoken in earlier sermons about how we did not always do this well. And different congregations have been better or worse than others. But there has been movement.

The first openly trans ministers were ordained in the 1980s but they were not able to find parish ministries, and in fact their names have been lost to history. I know that there are folks in the UUA who know their names, and had I been a journalist I would have ferreted out those names. But for the purposes of this sermon it is important to note that the names of those trans folks ordained in the 80s are not easily found. They are what we might call the first wave. They pushed against the heteronormity, and the two gender assumptions that most of us live with. They did something admirable - they helped change our denomination and they paid dearly for it.

The second wave of trans religious leaders include folks like Rev. Sean Dennison who was ordained in 2000 and was the first openly trans minister called to a parish in the UUA. His first called ministry was in Salt Lake City of all places. Mr. Barb Greve has been out as a trans man for decades. He has a long career as a Religious educator, and currently he is one of the two moderators of our

There are other names in this second wave some of them I know and many I do not. But not all their stories are as public as Sean's and Barb's. They are out and they are proud and I know that their path in ministry has been hard and they have had to fight transphobia.

What I do know that up until this time with called ministers who are trans is that there have not been any healthy transitions as they leave their ministries, all have been negotiated settlements. This is the price that individuals pay for putting themselves into the work of justice. In this second wave not all the names have been lost and that is good but the price each of these individuals have paid has been so high.

I know Rev. Sean in passing - I doubt he would remember who I am. I respect his work. Besides being a minister he is an artist and his sense of creativity is astounding. And I know he has persevered and stepped back and persevered again.

Mr. Barb Greve is a close and dear friend of mine. I met him maybe 12 or 13 years ago. He has persevered through so much. He was in the process to become a UU minister but stepped back in part because of the transphobia that he experienced. He remained a leader in our movement and was one of the founders of TRUUST (trans religious professionals Unitarian Universalist together) He is a lifelong UU and his passion for our faith is palpable and so he perseveres. He is in the process of re-entering the path to UU ministry. It is my hope that in the next few years I will be able to be at his ordination. And currently he serves as co-

moderator of our denomination. The other co-moderator is Elandria Williams, who I do not know personally, but I do know that Elandria uses the pronouns they and them and is one of the founders of Black Lives UU. This is no small thing to have these two people in the co-moderator position both of who identify outside the gender binary. This would not have been possible even a few years ago.

The Co-Moderators, the highest volunteer positions in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), are the Chief Governance Officers for the Association. The Co-Moderators chair the UUA Board of Trustees, facilitate the plenary (business) sessions at General Assembly, serve as an important interface with congregations that comprise our Association, and consult with our UUA President in developing a common vision for the Association.

Elandria is part of what I would call the third wave of trans and non-binary folk who are moving into or have some kind of leadership in our denomination. These are folks like Rev Sunshine Wolf at May Memorial, Rev. Dawn Fortune in NJ, Rev. Otto O'Connor in Massachusetts and others who are openly trans, and gender non-binary. They are feeling less pressure to conform to traditional gender identities and less pressure to be closeted. And yet it is not at all easy for this third wave.

Simply because we have religious leaders, ministers, Religious educators, music directors who are trans does not necessarily mean that all are treated well. I spoke with one seminarian recently, a trans person who had been turned down at two internship opportunities because they were "overqualified". Now I get that when you are hiring someone for a long-term position and you want them to stay. Hiring someone who is over qualified might mean that they will be looking for a new and better job that pays more too soon. But an internship is by its very nature a time

limited gig. Why wouldn't you want to get the most overqualified person possible?

We UUs are lucky enough to have had members and leaders who have persevered in working for transgender rights and equality. And we have a ways to go we are not done yet. We must continue to persevere. Why - why must we persevere you might be asking? Why must we continue to try to be the best allies possible? Well one answer is that 1st principle - We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. A second answer is because we are good at this welcoming. We are good at this affirming. And the world so desperately needs it.

We once again hosted the Building Beloved Community Beyond the Binary conference here at our church yesterday. Over 100 people were here. Why you might ask did I a middle-aged straight cisgender female work so hard to make that conference happen? Why did I support so many of you working so hard to make that conference happen? There are so many places for us to put our efforts why transgender issues, why LGBTQ issues?

There are many ways to answer that question. One answer and probably the most important is I do this work because I'm a mom to five who are rainbow spectrum of people - they range from cisgender heterosexual to transgender polyamorous and anything in between. They have challenged me in their growing up, and some of them are still growing up, most of the time the challenge was because they didn't do their chores, but sometimes it was because they had an identity I didn't understand. When my son Toby came out to me as trans it was all new to me. But there I was his mom - so it fell to me to learn, to understand and to keep on loving him. And you know it wasn't just a responsibility it was in my bones. Why do I do this work - because I am a mama bear and I will be nothing less than part of a

movement that makes this world more welcoming to my children and your children and you. I may not be able to change the whole world but I can work hard to help change my little corner of it. I could have done differently - we all know people whose families have rejected them. In this congregation - why do we do this work? We are welcoming congregation - we have officially taken the stand that all people no matter what gender, no matter whom you love, everyone is welcome. Why this church - maybe it was because it is in our bones too. We, in our history, had a minister David who while he was here came out as gay. You loved him and you saw his struggles. And you did not reject him for it. You loved him and you chose to look more deeply at what it means to love. And you became more welcoming not less. You did not have to do that but this congregation persevered. And you know that there are other churches that have made other choices. There are many churches who have fired their ministers for coming-out. But you found out that there is joy in welcoming. We don't welcome because we have to - we welcome because it is about being open to the unexpected, and to welcoming joy. What an honor it is to be a place, a community, a network of relationships, where people say Hi there glad to have you with us this morning. And we don't welcome because we are doing someone a favor we have found out that our congregation is better, it is stronger, it is more loving, because of all the different kinds of people we have welcomed and we are welcoming. We are much better at being a meadow than being a parking lot.

We are Building Beloved Community and we are bending the arc of history toward justice one welcome at a time.

Amen and Blessed be.

