

WELCOMING THE STRANGER  
23 September 2018  
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“Once upon a time, a long long time ago, there was a princess who, while walking one day, stubbed her toe on a root sticking out in the path. Vexed, she went to the prime minister and insisted that he draw up an edict declaring that the entire kingdom should be paved in leather so that no one would ever have to suffer from stubbing a toe again. Now the prime minister knew that the king always wanted to please his daughter...so, thinking quickly, the prime minister responded: “I have it! Instead of covering the whole kingdom in leather, Your Highness, why don’t we craft pieces of leather shaped to your feet and attach them in some suitable way? Then, wherever you go, your feet will have protection at the point of contact with the ground, and we will not have to incur such a large expense and forgo the sweetness of the earth.” The princess was well pleased with this suggestion, and so shoes came into the world, and much folly was averted.”<sup>1</sup>

Jan Kabat-Zinn, American Buddhist and psychologist, shares this story to illustrate ways that our minds work, and trip us up in the quest for wholeness and well being. It illustrates our tendency to judge the world as an extension of ourselves and our assumption that the world would be an easier place to navigate if we got things “our way”.

And notice, too, that it is adversity, something that causes pain, or vexation, or anger, that has us attempting to control the world, to try and change it to eliminate any discomfort. We do this on a regular basis, both internally and externally. If we let our fear or discomfort rule our lives, we spend enormous energy trying to avoid adversity. One classic way to do this is to avoid any new information or

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<sup>1</sup> Kabat-Zinn, Jon; [Coming To Our Senses](#), pp55-56 (excerpted)

experience. We attempt to create a world where everything is familiar and predictable, so that we can handle things.

Fortunately for the princess, and the kingdom, the prime minister had a larger view of things, knowing his survival depended on facing the problem head on and working it through to a way of being that would not overwhelm one's resources, yet provide the spaciousness of encounter to assure a continued life, a continued journey for all. The prime minister focused on the point of contact, on meeting things right where they are, inviting both a sense of protection and adventure, an openness to change within the way of things.

That is the crucial element of the prime minister's wisdom: meeting things as they are and feeling grounded in the adventure. When we do this authentically, we cannot sustain the illusion of having things "our way", we must invite what is – not what we would have it be – into our awareness. To meet the unknown, as Buddhist nun Pema Chodron would say, more as thrill than as threat.

The princess demonstrates another way that we trip ourselves up...the sense of entitlement, that somehow the world should respond to her rather than the other way round.

We can sometimes set our world up in ways that make it work for awhile. We can create "supposed to be's", and shape expectations. We can fill our world with should's and insist that it's always done this way. We can carry on like this sometimes for years, maybe decades, until something doesn't go our way, something goes terribly wrong. It is then that we realize the false foundation we've created to make sense of the world. That can be a horrible time of wilderness, of deep loss and confusion, of disappointment and a feeling of loss of ground, unable to find balance.

Spirituality is about finding yourself in the midst of all things – mysteriously connected to it and blessedly balanced in it. There are several disciplines, gifts of the spirit, that help us find this grounding.

One discipline, lifted up in most religions, is the welcome of the stranger. We stretch ourselves, our sensibilities, our awe and our humility when we make room for “other” and so relate in a new way to the world. This practice gives us a sense of expansiveness and of abundance, it surprises us into new discoveries and teaches us the wonder of diversity.

There is a Cosmic Principle generated in the I Ching, ancient Chinese spirituality, that reminds us that when a thing gives full expression to its uniqueness, it shows as beauty.<sup>2</sup>

How often have we missed another’s beauty because we don’t open our eyes to see it, or stifle one’s expression in response to our own limitations? Let alone what we do to ourselves...the rules we impose on ourselves that stifle the development of our unique beauty?

We are not on this earth to make everything the same, nor to claim it all for ourselves. We all know that – at least most of the time....

Of course, if there is disrespect or violation, then we do not welcome that energy. In order to be welcoming we have to have a healthy ability to say no. There are times when protection is essential to carry on forward. There are times when leaving a situation behind or turning another direction is called for. But there are far more times than we allow to make way for new perspectives, to welcome new

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<sup>2</sup> I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way. Carol Anthony and Hanna Moog., p.215

ways of being and to see the potential of the unknown before us. It begins with our letting go of the dogma we've created in our lives – the one that dictates who we have to be and how we have to live. It does us well to examine, from time to time, our own fundamentalisms – however they manifest. Releasing this alone will create energies of freedom and avenues of seeing in our ways and walking.

Humility and curiosity, and a willingness to see all play parts in this expansive way of being.

A favored movie in our home is “Baghdad café”, a story of the progression of relationships between unlikely characters. A German tourist finds herself stranded in a remote truck stop in the Mojave Desert, and through her quirky gifts of courage and curiosity, transforms the people she encounters, including herself.

An early scene has her in her motel room with the daughter of the owner, a tough African American woman trying to make ends meet. The daughter cleaned the rooms. The tourist, who caught the daughter snooping through her things out of curiosity, approached the young woman and took hold of her hands. She gently turned them over and saw, to her amazement, that her dark-skinned hands had pink palms. She commented on how beautiful this was, clearly a new sight, a revelation, a simple, gentle, transforming moment brought on by the willingness to see. The awkwardness of two complete strangers then melted into two people curious about one another and willing to learn more.

Curiosity is a trait that fuels the advancement of knowledge. Without it there would be little science, no exploration and uninspiring art. Without curiosity our learning curve would be flat and our sense of possibility confined to routine.

Curiosity also brings danger and the risks of unknown country. It can overwhelm reason to the point of recklessness, and bring things to bear that we are not ready

for or would do better without. A balance between risk and recklessness is an art, intermingling a willingness to take chances while cherishing the lives we are affecting, including our own.

Transforming our way of being into a harmony amongst the differences is the sacred work that we are called to do, especially now when the world is made smaller by our technological reach. Welcoming a guest at your table, either in person, in remembrance or in our expanding hearts, gives us the opportunity to stretch into our compassion and come to know our relational power.

Unitarian Universalism cherishes curiosity, doubt, exploration, creativity and newfound truth. We do this because we trust in the universe, in the basic stuff of which we are made, and know that wonder, awe, discovery and engagement can manifest love of Creation, respect for its immeasurable glory and responsibility towards its gift of Being.

Ours is a living faith, a creative spirituality. We engage our senses in understanding our lives and trust in an overriding Truth that permeates all of existence. This Truth can be known through our relating to ourselves, each other and the world around us. We practice our understandings in the living of our lives and honor the discipline of an open mind, knowing that we do not know it all, believing that each one of us can help us come to a deeper sense of meaning and fullness. And we know that there is a larger interconnecting reality which we give many names, a reality that is felt in moments of awe or stillness or shared joy. These experiences are not available to us without an openness of spirit, a willing curiosity for deeper understanding.

The Sufi master illustrated another ingredient needed in the practice of opening to “the other”. The practice of equanimity, which leads to natural compassion. The Sufi saw the rude and treacherous travellers who almost injured him as the same as him. He wished them a more balanced life, which he knew would lead them to better choices in relational life.

Claiming the equal worth of each individual is a leap of faith. It calls for an acceptance of a reality beyond our imagining. It touches on a cosmic universalism, that there is something essential of life that we share in common. Equality does not mean being the same. We are each unique yet of equal worth. Equality does not describe ability. We each have ways of being yet have equal worth.

The equality within our faith transcends politics or celebrity, performance or status. You are somehow equal to the first man on the moon. You are somehow equal to the sidewalk artisan. You are somehow equal to the murderous dictator. You are somehow equal to the nobel prize winner. It is that essence that is beyond our comprehension yet in our sacred knowing that can bring us to a sense of unity, spaciousness and abundance in our being together.

One of the historical assumptions, in political and religious spheres, is that equality should be based on everyone being the same. The standard of definition was measured by those in power. Systems of thought would then become the norm that determined value in a society and “equality” was then available to those who assimilated. This is how the power dynamics of racism, sexism, agism, ablism – all the discriminations that we witness, adhere to or suffer from come about: the domination of a quality of being, deeming all other ways of being as unequal, inferior...even dangerous. Difference is then seen as “deviant”.

Unfamiliar ways of being are deemed threats to “our way of life”. This way of being makes it very hard to welcome the stranger, to invite a guest at your table.

Unitarian Universalists do not separate earthly and divine matter...it is all one....the sacred essence of life is in all things and can be found in everything. Sometimes we have to search very hard to find the blessing of being. Sometimes we have to heal brokenness and break through habits of mind to come to that sense of Unity. Sometimes we have to let go of ways of being and behaving to come to that sacred knowing. But it's all there, in everything, if we only look and are willing to see.

Expanding our lives beyond what we know and see, giving our attention to the interconnected web of all existence and so keeping in mind that stranger, that guest, that is at our table too helps us not only cherish our lives but contribute to the well being of all life.

May we open our arms and minds to that which is other than ourselves or our experience. May we enrich our lives with the welcome of difference and the gratitude for increased understanding. May we come to places of awe and wonder that would not have occurred to us if we had not ventured. May we remain humble and curious. May we practice trust in ourselves and the cosmos.

And bit by bit, as we come to know the spaciousness of existence in its glorious diversity, our worlds will expand.

And beat by beat, as we come to know the expansiveness of hearts, our love emboldens our discoveries.

And breath by breath, as we untangle our minds and know our capacity for awareness, our wisdom soars.

It is then that we come once again to our understanding from birth of the true relational power of our lives, which heals beyond imagining and includes all being.

So may it be. Amen.