

Flower Power and Radical Welcome
Rev. Kevin Tarsa
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Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains

Reading *Open Up the Doors* by Rev. Lindasusan Ulrich
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/open-doors>

Sermon *Flower Power and Radical Welcome* Rev. Kevin Tarsa

Opening Doors

I know, the metaphor of opening doors is ironic, even painful, at this moment, when for everyone's safety the doors of our homes now mark a threshold that we do not let most people cross. It becomes a metaphor this morning for opening these virtual doorways or these Zoom windows as our current community doorways. It can also be a metaphor for the very personal doors we are opening in our inner life and awareness.

The Unitarian Flower Ceremony

In the annual service we might have held today, everyone would have been invited to bring a flower, or a blossoming stem, or a twig to create together a big, beautiful, eclectic bouquet or set of bouquets made up of our individual contributions.

It is an annual ritual begun in a Unitarian church in Prague in 1923 by Norbert Capek. After seeking political safety in the U.S. between the world wars, and after discovering Unitarianism here, Norbert and his wife, Maja, returned to their native Bohemia, which by then had become part of Czechoslovakia, and they started a Unitarian church that twenty years later, was the largest Unitarian congregation in the world, with 3200 members.

In the beginning, however, in the early 1920s, it was a small, simple, unadorned church. Norbert created a ritual to bring beauty and at the same time to embody a foundational awareness in Unitarianism – the idea that *every* person has beauty and value, (worth and dignity), that every person brings something unique and vital to the community, if we will let them, and that when we all contribute who we are, as different as we are, something extraordinary can be born, something sweeter than we know.

I'm missing today that annual physical ritual of creating those bouquets, *and* it's been wonderful to see the photos of yourselves in the midst of your beautiful flowers and at your home doorways. I invite and encourage you to be part of the readings and the images that we bring into Sunday mornings each week now. Keep watching for the invitations and send your photos or recordings in. If that sounds daunting or you do not have the equipment or are not sure how to do it, Please check in with us. We may be able to help.

We are needing, these days, to find new ways to bring who we are to this shared community, and it looks like we are going to have time to get very thoughtful and creative and good at this.

The Long Road Ahead

The president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, wrote to us this week offering an update on the Association's guidance regarding in-person services. Based on consultations with public health officials and other experts, the leadership of our UUA continues to recommend that congregations not gather in person. They also recommend that "congregations begin planning for virtual operations for the next year (through May 2021)."

Immediately after that statement, Susan wrote, "Take a moment to breathe. I know this is significant."

I invite you to take a moment to breathe. A whole year yet. Breathe.....

As President Frederick-Gray points out in her message, approaching the future this way will allow us "to be creative with our long-term planning while still being flexible if conditions change significantly." If things get safer sooner, we can adapt to that!

I know that most, if not all, of you will agree with her that "Our care for the well-being and safety of our members, [friends and] staff must be a priority in this pandemic." If we did not realize it before, we are reminded each day in the news that "our actions directly impact the health and well-being of our neighbors."

Susan goes on to point out that "religious gatherings are considered highly contagious events. The acts of singing, the familiarity of people across households, the multigenerational community of children, youth, adults, and seniors—**the things that make our congregations so special**—also create more risk for spreading the virus."

From a different angle, I love the idea that our religious gatherings are highly contagious events! May ours be so!

And if we are to open up the doors more, wider still, as far as they will go, we'll need to figure out how to open them up in new ways virtually. One of the gifts already of being entirely online as a congregation is that geographic distance is no longer a barrier to participation. It's been great to see the familiar names and faces of people who have moved, and it's been wonderful as well to see you who are new to this community. If you are wanting to know more about UUism or UUCM, please let us know. With the long haul in mind, we are looking for ways to open the doors and to connect meaningfully.

Meanwhile, while we are all looking out our separate doorways, for the next year perhaps, we can be looking inside and growing our internal commitment to become, together, ever more radically welcoming in heart and mind.

The Rest of the Story

The flower ritual that Norbert Capek created doesn't end with creating the shared bouquet. At the end of the service he invited everyone to take a different flower or twig home with them as symbols of the gifts they received from each other. If we understand and take to heart the Unitarian Universalist values beneath that ritual to their fullest, we will seek to value the gifts that each person brings, even those whose presence stretches us and invites us to change.

Stephanie Spellers writes in powerful and practical terms of the notion of radical welcome. I was introduced to an adaption of her work in a course I took recently in trans-inclusion from Zr. Alex Kapitan and Rev. Mykal Slack, a course in becoming truly welcoming to transgender and non-binary persons. I'm drawing on their work and using some of their language this morning.

Today, I simply want to share the progression of welcoming - from invitation, to inclusion, to radical welcome - so that as we are learning to live and to celebrate community in new ways together, we can also be imagining community in new ways together.

Levels of Welcome

Briefly, welcome begins with Invitation

At the level of **invitation** we say that everyone is welcome, regardless of...fill in the blank. We invite everyone in, "whether or not we are prepared for their presence" – whether or not we are prepared for their spiritual views, their oddities, their political views, their smell, their mental health challenges, their marginalized identities, their difference.

At the level of **invitation** we offer a general and broad welcome, assuming that our being friendly is enough for someone to feel welcome, and we give the job of welcoming to the greeters. At this level, of invitation, the underlying message is, "You will be assimilated"...to the extent you are willing to be like us, to believe like us, to behave like us. We invite you into our like-minded community.

Sound familiar?

It's an important starting place - in our personal lives and in our community life,.

At the next level of welcome, the level of **inclusion**, we work a little harder at incorporating those who are different in some way. We are more specific in our welcome, we name LGBTQ persons, or that Black Lives Matter. We make surface changes to reduce the barriers - we have all-gender restrooms and appropriate signs, we put in ramps for wheelchairs, we put our preferred pronouns on our nametags, we include photographs of people of color in our visual elements.

We work at the welcoming, but only up to the point where we might have to change our culture, have to change the way we do things around here in order for new folks to feel truly welcome, only up to the point where we don't have to give up the things that we like in order to help someone else have the things that are important to them: our style of music or our style of services, for example, our kinds of social events, and ways of meeting, the language we use...

Sound familiar?

It's an important move to make in our personal lives and in our community life, moving from invitation to inclusion.

Radical Welcome

Radical Welcome, then, genuinely embodies the belief that each one of us is better off when all of us can be ourselves and express ourselves fully, when we can learn from one another. People outside the majority norms aren't merely tolerated, but centered, integrated and valued fully for who they are and the unique perspective and the life-changing gifts they bring. When offering a radical welcome, new, out-of-*our*-ordinary people, especially people typically marginalized in some way, are not only invited and accepted and incorporate, their presence transforms the community, liberates the community from its assimilating sameness.

Radical welcome is about allowing out-of-*our*-ordinary people to change us.

So, a quick Caveat: There is a boundary when it comes to behavior that is destructive. Not anything goes. We cannot welcome all behavior. But radical welcome asks us to discern carefully whether a person's behavior is truly destructive, or rather simply uncomfortably but helpfully disruptive.

Why Now?

While this may all seem rather removed from the stay-at-home realities of the moment, a year staying at home (or however long it turns out to be) is going to ask us to get increasingly clear about what community is, what community means, and what community can be, at its best.

My hope is that if we plant the seeds now for thinking about who we are and how, about who we welcome and how, we might be able to open our doors wider still, to grow our vision for what UUCM can be in this community. We can look for the ways to live toward that vision now, even while otherwise staying at home. We can live toward it in all the choices we make about how to connect and gather and act in the world, even from our individual living rooms.

In the course, we spoke of something as seemingly simple as the welcoming words we use in our services. As in many other congregations, we often say something like, "We welcome you, whether you are young or old, theist or humanist, whether you walked in or rolled in, etc. The point here being that WE welcome YOU.

Radical welcome, instead, invites “we” language.

“We are young, we are old. We are comfortable wealthy, we are struggling to make ends meet. We are at many places long the spectrum of gender identity. We are frightened, we are content. We are humanist, we are theist. We are the bearers of white privilege, we are targets of harm because of the color of our skin.”

Not WE welcome YOU, but WE are US. We, as we are, are already included.

Such a small turn in language and framing, for such a significant difference in the meaning and the sense of community.

In Radical Welcome, everyone takes responsibility for fostering belonging and for building relationships, and members grow deeper in their faith and in their humanity as a result.

Stephanie Spellers suggests that Radical Welcome is not about liberating those who are coming in the doors. It’s about liberating those of us who are already inside.

*Open up the doors, my friends,
Lest we keep the stranger out*

Open up the doors, my friends,
and in so doing, let yourself in.

So may it be.

So may we be.

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