Welcoming Congregation: What Is It?
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On Halloween night, a seminary friend opened her home to me so that I could hide out from trick-or-treaters. I don't like Halloween much, and I always leave the house on October 31, turn off all the lights, and roam until after 9:00, when it's usually safe to return to a peaceful home.

My friend also works in a church that's not in Richmond, and one of the members of her church has a cat who recently had kittens. He came to church one day while she was at work, took her to his house to see the kittens, and persuaded her that a woman living alone really needs a low-maintenance companion. A cat, for example. He did a good job, apparently, of persuading, and while he was on the subject, he persuaded her that once you decide to have a cat, there is really no difference between one cat and two cats.

He's right, of course, and I spent the evening captivated by my friend's two new kittens, Grace and Sophia, as they raced around the apartment and occasionally took breaks by climbing up my leg to sit in my lap. My friend gloried in her new apartment mates for days, and then took them to the vet, who told her that Grace and Sophia were some mighty fancy names for a couple of tom cats. She was dumbfounded, and called her granddaughter, three years old and her partner in every major decision she makes. "What are we going to do, Alise?" she asked her granddaughter. "What are we going to name the kitties now? Think it over and call me back." In a couple of days, Alise called with her solution. "Nanny, let's just call them girls."

We Unitarian Universalists welcome and support the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. We may be more affirming and supportive than any other denomination. We most certainly never tell people they are sinners, or they're going to Hell. We do not tell LGBT members that we love them, but they can't participate in leading worship. We take public stands in support of LGBT causes all over the country.

Let's just call ourselves welcoming. Let's not go through that complicated process of self-examination, looking at what we believe about gender and sexual identity, and how we came to believe it. Let's not ask ourselves if we're more or less privileged than our friends and colleagues. Let's not set ourselves up for conflict and disappointment and frustration and opening up who knows what can of worms. Let's just call ourselves welcoming.

And, we ARE welcoming. In fact, I have wished many times as a member of the Welcoming Congregations steering committee at UUCC that we could change the name of the program, because the number one response we get when we talk about Welcoming Congregations is just that: I thought we already WERE welcoming. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation, though, certified by the UUA as having been through this strenuous process, isn't something we do just for ourselves, just for our own congregation.

At UUCC, we have been talking about Welcoming Congregations for years. The first time I offered to be on the steering committee was over three years ago, but it turned out that we didn't do it at that time. We had an interim minister, a search committee was looking for a called minister, and we were building our church. We were looking inward too intently, and at that moment in our history, that was what we had to be doing. I was told at this time that for the program to be effective, there needed to be a core of heterosexual members willing to lead the effort. We don't ask our GLBT members to do this work for themselves. Certainly they are on the committee, but not as the prime movers.

At the core of the program, there is a series of workshops. Rev. Keith Kron, from the UUA Office of GLBT Concerns, has written a handbook which contains all the workshops, plus other valuable resources. There are twelve workshops in all, but you don't have to use all twelve of them.

In fact, there is a guide in the handbook that tells you what workshops to include if you don't want to use them all, and individual congregations, depending on their own identities, have plenty of leeway to choose what best fits their needs. The final workshop asks, "What's Next?", and at that point the people who have been doing the work decide where they want to go, what they want to do, with what they have learned.

Rev. Kron tells us that characteristically, communities involved in becoming Welcoming Congregations can be divided into four groups. This isn't a deliberate distinction or even a conscious one; people don't necessarily self-identify in any of these categories. And this perspective is surely not limited to Welcoming Congregations.

The ones are the people who are committed to the program and believe in it to the extent that they are willing to use their volunteer time for the church on the Welcoming Congregations committee. The twos are the people who want to become Welcoming Congregations and support the effort, but don't choose to be too deeply involved in it. They'll come to some of the workshops, maybe a lot of the workshops. The threes are people who don't support the program but don't intend to get in the way of the people who do. And the fours are people who oppose the program and say so.

These distinctions probably exist in any kind of work that we do as a church, or anywhere else, for that matter, and Rev. Kron teaches that the ones and the fours are not the people in a group who are likely to be talking together. The ones don't use their time and effort trying to persuade or change the minds of the fours. That's not productive, and not efficient use of time. The ones make the most impact talking to the twos, with whom they are most likely to be in conversation. The twos, then, make the most impact talking to the threes, because the twos are most likely to be talking to the ones and the threes. The threes will be the people talking to the twos and the fours, and possibly transforming the fours into threes. At UUCC, I don't know of any fours, and that doesn't mean they aren't there. It may, however, point to the accuracy of what Rev. Kron says: if there are fours, they aren't likely to be talking to ones.

Our workshops have been well attended, and I admit to great relief over that. We were asked before we began what our greatest fear was, and mine was that when we presented the first workshop, six people would be there, and four of them would be committee members. That has not been the case, thank goodness.

It HAS been the case, though, that more gay people than straight people have come to the workshops, and often these people cannot wait to tell their stories. Over and over again, I am struck by the need in the GLBT community for a friendly ear to listen to the stories. Sometimes when I'm listening, it's like watching somebody whose head has been held underwater bursting up to the surface at last, drawing in those long, enormous breaths, as deep as they can get.

As I've said here before, it is healing work to tell your story, and it is holy work to listen to somebody else's story. Not easy, not by any means. Sometimes the stories reveal pain that nobody wants to look at. Sometimes the stories reveal ways that we have hurt each other, without ever knowing or intending. But the hurt is there anyway. And that is why, as much as any other reason, we become Welcoming Congregations. It's because as we go through the process, people can finally, in a safe place among people they can trust, raise their heads out of the water and draw in those deep, healing breaths.

We become Welcoming Congregations so that we can name our own realities and compare them to the realities of our friends and companions. In a recent workshop, we were asked what we do to avoid being called gay, lesbian, dyke, queer. I realized that I live a privileged life in that I don't do anything to avoid that, don't think about it, have no concerns about it. My friend, who has done years of committee work with me, exchanged countless e-mails in stressful times, who gave me summer jobs when I was in seminary, spoke of how it felt to her to hear my comment. She said she has to think about that every day…about who knows she's lesbian, who doesn't, when to tell, what to tell, what will be the implications of telling, or of someone finding out. All these concerns that she carries around with her, weighing her down, every day, while I walk around free.

She doesn't blame me, I don't blame myself, she doesn't resent me, I don't pity her. But I realize how much privilege I have over her, and that hurts us both. Welcoming Congregations let us shine light onto these realities, make them speakable, recognize that they are present, and destructive.

Finally, though, we become Welcoming Congregations for reasons that reach far beyond us. I have a young woman friend, a friend of my son's, who is in her first year of seminary. We spent a morning and part of an afternoon together not long after the school year began, drinking coffee and talking. This young woman is smarter than I am, with a powerful spirit, and she loves Christianity. She is a Unitarian Universalist at heart. I know that and anxiously await the day when she discovers it for herself. She has attended UUCC, as a visitor so far, but a devoted visitor. I still hold the memory of the excitement in her voice the day I told her in a phone conversation that there was such a thing as UU Christians. It was following that revelation that she began to come to UUCC once in a while.

On this day in the coffee shop, talk of seminary blended quickly into stories of other areas of her life. She spoke of the frustration of being told, "It's not that I disapprove of you, but I can't agree with your lifestyle." "I don't have a lifestyle!" she said. "It's like they think when class is over I get in my gay car and drive down the gay road. Lesbian is not the only thing that I am!" Eventually she shared with me the story of a long-time friend of hers (and later, she permitted me to use this story someday). He is also gay, and she told about a night years ago when they were at somebody's apartment. The young man's mother was not supportive of him, and on this night, he was on the phone with her. "All of a sudden," said my friend, "his face just got blank. Just flat. 'OK, Mom, ' he said, and he hung up the phone. Then he just charged out of the apartment, slammed the door. I went running after him, chased him down the street, and when I finally caught up with him, he was standing in front of this steel door. He had punched it, and his hand was bleeding, and he was kicking it, kicking it, with his boot. I said, ' What did she say to you?' and he turned and looked at me and said, 'She called me a f***ing faggot.' I just held out my arms to him, held on to him, and he cried."

These two were teenagers when that happened. Kids. My friend looked straight at me, and the anguish in her face blocked my throat with tears. "Why?" she asked me, "Why would God let a thing like that happen?"

"God didn't let it happen," I told her, and she said, "I know." But she doesn't have enough Unitarian Universalist language yet to realize what that pure light within her that guides her way on really is. She isn't yet able to name that God who chased her friend down the street. God stood as a witness to his suffering as he beat up that steel door with his fist and his boots. And God held him in God's own arms while he cried. As little Methodist children, we learned to sing, "God is love, God is love." God was there that night the whole time. The whole time.

What I have not told you about the young man in this story is that when he was fourteen, he drank Drano in an effort to commit suicide. And that, my friends, is why we become Welcoming Congregations. It's an emergency. It's not for ourselves, but for whatever damaged spirit out in the larger world might be thinking it is better to be dead than to be gay, and might…maybe…hear about us. We need to be Welcoming Congregations not so that we can hang a plaque on one of our walls, but so that we can put the word out all around us: come to see us. We've been trying. We've been thinking about you. We've been waiting for you. You are welcome here.

And so may it be.