

Radical Hospitality

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The original idea for this homily came from reading a new pamphlet that the Unitarian Universalist Association put out entitled “Religious Hospitality: A Spiritual Practice for Congregations”. “Hmm?” I thought; “that is provocative”. This brochure, which I have right here, talks about being hospitable, both individually and as a faith community. It talks about what it takes to be hospitable, what other faiths believe about hospitality and what are some of the roadblocks to being hospitable. Definitely worth reading.

I would like to start this morning by talking about hospitality. What does it mean to be hospitable? Does it mean saying “hello” to the person beside you in the pew? Does it mean making a cake for the new neighbours? Does it mean helping the new person at work find out where everything is? What does it mean to you?

I ask you to think of a time when you have felt truly welcomed. Maybe someone took you in when you were far from home. Maybe it was coming home after a long day. Relive those feelings for a moment. (pause) Feel that warmth again; see the smiles and feel those arms embracing you. (pause) What a gift it is to be truly welcomed.

Now go beyond that. Think about what it would be like to be truly, compassionately cared for. Think about someone going above and beyond to bring you warmth, safety, compassion, care. That is where the radical part of this service begins.

Throughout the 100 year history of this church there have been an overwhelming number of examples of people going out of their way; above and beyond; being radically hospitable. I want to expand on three of the stories that Steven mentioned in his service last week.

In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, Lotta Hitschmanova made it her mission to help out the orphaned and suffering children left to make their way through the devastation wrought by Hitler and his armies. She founded the Unitarian Services Committee of Canada and began to mobilize people from all over Canada to assist her in her endeavour. On August 29, 1945 USC Canada was registered under the War Charities Act. At first it was only allowed to raise money from Unitarians but in February 1946 the appeal was extended to all Canadians.

She called on Canadians from coast to coast to give new and used clothing, money, toys, food and medical supplies which were collected, sorted and shipped out of Unitarian Church depots in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton and, yes, Vancouver. This church operated a depot from its building at 1550 west 10th avenue from 1946 at the beginning of the campaign until 1970 when the depot was closed.

Members of this church, including the Reverend Alfred Stiernotte and his wife and Margaret Donald operated the depot and collected, accounted for and passed on funds

donated to the USC. In 1946 alone, \$64,985.38 was sent to Europe from across Canada. They collected, sorted, repaired, packaged and shipped clothing and toys which in 1946 added up to 180,000lbs! 1100 children were aided in that first year!

Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova, always attired in an army nurse's uniform and military-style hat, was a frequent visitor here in Vancouver during this time and our UCV archives are filled with her correspondences, schedules of visits and activities. She too, would have been 100 in 2009; I feel honoured for our congregation to share this amazing woman's birthday.

In 1946 the Unitarian Services Committee also launched a campaign entitled "Foster Parent Scheme for Nobody's Children" where for \$15 a month (no small amount of money at the time) you could sponsor or temporarily adopt a child and provide for their health, nutrition, safety and CARE. \$45 would give the most severely in need, three months in a USC run facility receiving proper food, medical attention and human care; some for the first time.

From a Unitarian Services committee brochure advertising the "Foster Parent Scheme for Nobody's Children it is written:

"These are the boys and girls who are to build a lasting peace - Children who run away when you speak to them-children who cry when they hear a noise because they are afraid of another airplane - children who never slept in a warm bed, never had a substantial meal: these are the war-shocked, abandoned, sick and hungry orphans of Europe today.

Show them a set of colours and watch which colour they will choose: before them is red, green, blue and yellow - all the bright shades of earth; and they pick up grey, because it is the only colour they have known in their conscious lives...

Many of them do not know their own names - they were born in concentration camps and never experienced love or physical care; only fear, starvation, misery and disease. They have seen sights with their young eyes that would make our blood run cold"

Again, the UCV volunteers to the Unitarian Services Committee mobilized where help was needed. They answered telephones, took and collected pledges, matched people with their foster children; all while continuing to operate the original USC depot. Donations from Winnipeg and Vancouver accounted for 46% of all the supplies sent to Europe at this crucial time.

All of this was accomplished with a congregation smaller than 100 members! (pause) Radical hospitality, I say.

In 1968/69 requests for sanctuary began to come in at UCV from young men who had been drafted in the US to fight the war in Vietnam. They came from all over the U.S. and continued to come until about 1973. Members of our church facilitated the entry of an unknown number of these young men into Canada, they housed them and fed them for short periods of time and raised funds for these young men to get a new start and to "disappear" in this new country. Two short term stay hostels and soup kitchens were run by members of the church and countless members offered up rooms in their own homes.

The records are a little sketchy on this period, obviously out of necessity; these men did not want to be documented. It is not known how many young draft dodgers came through

the homes of UCV'ers. It is not known how many young men were served in the hostels. There are also stories of cross border picnics at the Peace Arch border crossing, where an unknown number of young men entered Canada after the end of the picnic with people from UCV who had attended.

People opening up their homes, wallets and hearts, risking their own freedom to help those who needed them. Radical hospitality, I'd say.

The aftermath of the Vietnam War offered members of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver another opportunity for radical hospitality. In 1978/79 there was an appeal from the Canadian government for private citizens of Canada to sponsor what had come to be known as the Vietnamese Boat People. They were families who had fled the devastation and corruption of their war torn land, often packing as many people as possible into fishing boats and hoping for the best. Often, these boats didn't make it very far and many of these families perished or if they were lucky enough to be rescued ended up in makeshift refugee camps in China and other nearby nations.

When the call went out from the Canadian government for sponsors, a small group led by Pat and Sandy Hutcheon decided to take on private sponsorship of a family. They filled out the paperwork and waited. In September 1979 the family arrived, two brothers and a 4 year old sister. This group committed through the plan to pay **ALL** of the costs for this family to live for a year; rent, food, clothing, utilities, medical and dental costs. All that the government provided these families was transportation to Vancouver and 1 year of msp coverage. The rest was up to the UCV groups.

After the first group had filled out their requests other groups soon formed and followed. Dorothy Goresky, Marianne Miller and Patience Towler were also involved in groups. The second family arrived in December of 1979 with 9 family members and another in December of 1981 with 5 members; a husband/wife, two little boys and the husband's sister. This last group had been sponsored by Patience Towler's group.

Patience went to the airport to pick up her group's family. They arrived in tropical clothing with two plastic shopping bags of belongings. She took them from the airport straight to the Army and Navy store in New Westminster and bought them all sweaters, coats, boots, etc with funds that the group had been saving while they waited. They had rented them an apartment, furnished it, bought food, paid the utilities. They arranged for the adults to get into English language classes and for the kids to get into public school. They drove them to doctor's appointments, dental appointments and assisted wherever necessary and possible.

There were 4 people in Patience's group; people with their own housing needs, families, jobs, appointments, etc.

Can you imagine taking this on? For strangers?

These are just three examples of UCV members providing radical hospitality to a troubled world.

More recently, since its beginnings, countless people have been sponsored and aided by UCV's refugee committee. In my 6 ½ yrs with the church alone there have been at least 11 refugees that have been aided by UCV's committee and the Sheila Thompson refugee fund.

Countless volunteer hours have gone into the creation, coordination and weekly operating of the Single Parent's Food bank which has operated out of UCV for the past 23 years. It has offered primarily women led families a place to come for assistance while being treated with respect and caring. They offer breakfast, coffee, children's programs, educational seminars, a clothing swap and friendship.

So, we at UCV have marched, served, built, given, collected and protested. Our mentors and predecessors have gone out of their ways to work for strangers; the orphan in the picture, the family from Vietnam, the man being drafted to a war he cannot fight. Sight unseen, seemingly ordinary UCV people have opened their hearts, minds, wallets and got busy.

So we arrive to today, January 11th 2009. Looking back on our rich history is truly inspiring. We have a lot to be proud of and to celebrate in 2009, our 100th birthday.

I work in a program of this church where I get to "do" this every week. I get to look at and teach our children and youth about programs where people need help. I get to organize fundraisers with our children and youth to "do" something to help. I get to write letters with them about things we want our government to change. I get to march to protect sacred spaces. I get to learn, teach, explore, sing and participate. In essence, I get to live my faith every week (okay, well maybe most weeks).

From the brochure that I mentioned at the beginning,

"The best reason to reach out isn't to help another person; it is to make ourselves whole. It frees us from the prison of the self. Reaching out with love frees us from individualism and narcissism." I know that when I spend my time in the service of another I am left feeling good, happy and peaceful.

I love Unitarian Universalism because it is a faith of action; it is a faith of doing. If we look around this room today we know that these are people "doing" to change our world. From Michael Scales and Judy Villett who decided that we need a welcoming presence in the sanctuary each week, to Joan Armstrong who decided it would be great to get people together through a circle dinner program, to Jon Raitt who makes sure that there are copies of Steven's sermons available right after the service each week and all of the many teachers, helpers and youth advisors who spend so much time, energy and care working with our children and youth; we are a people of action.

Admittedly, many of the examples given today are extraordinary or radical. We can't all do what these people have done, (pause) but we can do something (for ourselves as much as for the other). Like the song in our hymn book goes, we can each take just one more step, say one more word, say one more prayer and sing one more song.

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