Welcome as a Spiritual Practice – Alex Kapitan – April 23, 2017

Hello dear friends! Thank you so much for the gift of sharing space together today, and for the invitation to spend some time with you. It is wonderful to be here.

Like Janet said, my name is Alex and I’m in the business of Welcome.

I’m particularly excited to be here because I’ve heard that you all are engaging with some renewal work around being a Welcoming Congregation. Has everyone here heard of the Welcoming Congregation Program? Has anyone not heard of it? Totally okay—it’s a UU program that congregations can go through to intentionally increase their welcome and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. This congregation was first recognized in 2004. Is there anyone here today who was around for that? Raise your hands!

So I’m here today, 13 years after your recognition as a Welcoming Congregation, to ask you to revisit—and possible reimagine—what welcome means to you.

I want to start by telling you about the most welcoming experience I’ve ever had. It happened four years ago when I joined the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus.

It was really scary for me to audition for the chorus. I thought for sure that I would be judged and questioned, that I would get more than one hairy eyeball and be rejected, or laughed out of the room—I mean, it is the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus, after all, and there I was, not a man and not entirely gay.

When I sent a tentative email saying I was trans, and could I audition, I got a cheerful response saying “oh absolutely, we have other trans guys in the chorus!” But I was still worried. Sure, they had other trans guys in the chorus, but those guys were probably men—men who even I wouldn’t be able to tell were assigned female at birth.

I wasn’t a trans guy like that. I’m a queer, genderqueer, gender fluid, flamboyantly masculine and feminine all at one time, neither here nor there, Mary-Martin-as-Peter-Pan, bowtie-flashing motorcycle riding b-o-i boi.

But with my partner Teddy’s support I went for it. And no one batted an eye. I was assigned to the second tenor section and at my first rehearsal I immediately felt drawn into the collective embrace of 150 gay men. That makes it sound way sexier than it was but imagine this: at the close of my first rehearsal, me and the other newbies were ushered to the front of the room and the entire chorus sang to us. They sang “Everything Possible” by our own UU minister Rev. Fred Small. We do this every time new people join the chorus. We sing to them. You can be anybody you want to be; you can love whomever you will.

That’s what welcome looks like. I had every reason to feel different and sidelined, but instead, I immediately felt like I belonged. People went out of their way to greet me and get to know me. I was celebrated, toasted, and honored at my first concert. They weren’t expecting me, but they knew just what to do when I showed up. And years later, the leaders
of the chorus continue to seek out barriers to my inclusion and get rid of them, because they recognize that welcome isn’t a one-and-done thing.

This experience of welcome has changed my life. It has given me a feeling of ease in my own skin that I’ve never felt anywhere else. It has helped me to be even more myself.

Have you ever felt that sort of welcome and belonging? Can you imagine what it would be like to feel that way—that full and total welcome, that deep and unconditional belonging—every time you entered this space? Can you imagine what it would be like for every single person who ever entered this space to feel that way?

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This is what the Welcoming Congregation Program is about.

Embodying that sort of welcome—the sort of welcome that makes every person feel intense belonging, the sort of welcome that changes lives—that is the invitation of the Welcoming Congregation Program.

Becoming a Welcoming Congregation is about recognizing where we draw the limits of our circle of belonging. It’s about learning more about the diversity that already exists here and how we can be fully inclusive of that diversity. And it’s about working concretely to expand the circle of belonging.

I want to let you in on a little secret. When congregations first go through a Welcoming Congregation Program, they often focus on “those people out there.” They talk about welcome as if it’s something “we” need to do for “them.” But here’s the secret: Being a Welcoming Congregation isn’t about “them.” It’s about “us.” It’s about what our definition of “us” is. And. It’s about what we are willing to do to expand that definition.

When we say “we,” who do we mean? As Unitarian Universalists in general, or as people who are part of this congregation in particular. When we say “us,” who comes to mind? What sort of people are we? What are the unspoken assumptions about who we are—and more importantly, who we aren’t?

How old are we? Where did we grow up? How much education have we had? What sort of jobs do we work? What race are we? How much money do we have? How able are our bodies and minds? How did we vote in November? What do we think about God?

Every community has unspoken answers to these questions and a hundred more. Every community has a definition of “us” and “we” that dictates the boundaries of the circle of belonging. Somewhere there’s a line that gets drawn and “we” are inside of it. “They” are not. And what happens is that we communicate our definition of “us” in a thousand conscious and unconscious ways.

What the Welcoming Congregation Program challenges us to do is to ask careful questions about where this line is drawn; how we limit the definition of “us” and whether those limits serve our vision and our values.
It helps us to practice redefining “us” and drawing the circle of belonging wider, little by little, inch by inch, slowly but surely. The Welcoming Congregation Program makes it a core spiritual practice to ask, “where are the boundaries of belonging now?” and “how can we expand them further?”

This is a big ask. It’s a big deal to first look at where that circle is drawn, and it’s an even bigger deal to acknowledge that there’s room to grow. And then it’s a huge deal to actually work hard to expand the circle, and then to keep working—to never stop and say “alright! we’ve arrived. We’re done now.” Being welcoming isn’t a destination, it’s a practice.

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So at this point maybe you’re going, whoa whoa whoa—I thought being a Welcoming Congregation was a gay thing. And you’re not wrong—in 1990, when the program was started, it was born out of a shocking recognition that our denomination’s vision and values around welcome were not being practiced when it came to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

Attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people that were an ingrained part of our larger culture were being unconsciously perpetuated in our congregations. We didn’t think that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were really a part of “us.” Non-straight people were “them.” Often we realized that we were only welcoming to people who weren’t straight if they never reminded us that they were different, that they were “them.” If they didn’t “flaunt” their sexuality. You know what I mean?

So we learned that real welcome takes hard work and it takes actively fighting the messages we are taught by our larger culture about what—and who—is “normal” and “right” and most valuable.

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It’s been 27 years since our movement had to come face to face with the fact that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were having unwelcoming, oppressive experiences in UU congregations because of ignorance, stereotypes, and the belief that non-straight people weren’t “us.”

We’ve made a lot of progress in 27 years. But not enough.

Because I’m in the business of welcome, I hear a lot of stories. And one story I hear over and over again is from people who say, you know, as UUs we are really good at welcoming people if there’s only one thing that’s “different” about them. They’ll say—it’s okay if I’m gay, as long as I’m also white, and college-educated, and able-bodied, and monogamous, and middle or upper class. It’s okay if I’m a person of color, as long as everything else about me matches up with the norms and expectations of who “we” are as UUs.

But the more things about me that fall outside the boundary of how we define “us,” the harder it becomes to experience welcome and belonging.
This story hits really close to home for me, because even though I was raised in this faith, in Unitarian Universalism, I have never found a congregation that gave me that sense of deep belonging. The truth is, when most people picture “us” and think about who “we” are, me and my chosen family aren’t part of the picture.

The reason why, I think, is really beautifully illustrated by a framework that comes out of the Episcopal Church to talk about this concept. The idea is that there are three phases of welcome: invitation, incorporation, and incarnation.

**Invitation** is represented by the open door: “everyone’s welcome, come on in!” But the expectation is that everyone who comes in will adapt to the existing expectations and norms for who we are and how things are done here. If people can’t assimilate, they’ll eventually leave.

**Incorporation** is represented by the concept of inclusion and the desire for diversity without real culture shift. So, efforts are made to include marginalized people, and we might incorporate new projects like a LGBT youth prom, or a yearly gospel service, or a monthly Spanish-language potluck, but the larger structures of our community and its norms and expectations remained unchanged, meaning that we see a sort of revolving door of people with marginalized identities, but they generally don’t experience true belonging.

**Incarnation** is real, radical welcome. To quote one of our hymns, it’s what happens when we are willing to be changed by what we’ve started. Incarnation is about mutual relationship and the ability to be transformed by those relationships. In incarnation, we ensure that marginalized perspectives, values, and gifts influence the very core of who we are, that all people who are part of our community see themselves fully reflected in our leadership and in the culture we co-create together.

The first generation of the Welcoming Congregation Program helped some congregations move from being actively unwelcoming spaces to the invitation stage, and it helped a lot of other congregations move from invitation to incorporation. But incorporation isn’t enough.

I can’t find a congregational home in Unitarian Universalism because as a queer and trans person, I need incarnation. Invitation is being welcomed into a church but not being able to use the bathroom when I get there because there’s no gender neutral option. Incorporation is being included in a church because there’s a bathroom I can use and efforts have been made to use language that doesn’t divide everyone up into brothers and sisters. But I can’t bring my best friend to church with me because not only is he also queer and trans, but he’s Black, and Southern, and really loves Jesus. Incarnation is a church that says, Alex: what does queer Unitarian Universalism look like? If you were the music director here, what would you do with the music? What is your biggest, brightest hope for spiritual community and how can we make it happen together?

I need incarnation. I need a community that embraces welcome as a practice. A community that, instead of assuming that we are all the same, assumes that we are all different, fully values those differences, and embraces the possibility of being transformed by them.
I need a community where you can be “different” from everyone else in more than one way, more than two ways—heck, I need a community where we can no longer tell who the “different” ones are, because we are ALL different. That’s what my community looks like!

I need this. And I know I’m not the only one here who needs this.

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For me, the purpose of spiritual community is not to be comfortable. The purpose of spiritual community is to build relationships that are strong enough to hold us when things are hard. The purpose of spiritual community is to practice, together, what it would be like to build more and more and more relationships like that, until all of humanity, all of life, is in right relationship.

The Welcoming Congregation Program is a way to practice this. The first generation of the program was designed to focus on a particular facet of difference—sexual orientation—so that we could build the skills and the practices that would help us build from there, continue to deepen our welcome, learn how to expand our definition of “us” a little bit more every day, every month, every year.

Ultimately, for me, being a Welcoming Congregation means never stopping until there is no more us and them. Until the concept of “them” no longer exists because all of life is included in our definition of “us.”

This is a tall order. It’s not easy. It’s not safe. It’s not comfortable.

And.

In order to heal our world, it’s necessary. I firmly believe that this is the place where we can practice this. Because welcome is a spiritual practice. If you hear nothing else I say this morning, hear this: welcoming isn’t something you are, it’s something you do. It’s something we have to practice. Practice means making mistakes. Practice means getting messy, and being vulnerable. Practice means taking risks, and trying new, uncomfortable things. And getting them wrong. And trying again. And again. Because our world needs us to. Because we need each other to.

So, what can you do to question the messages that you’ve been given about who “we” are? What is the next way you can expand the circle of inclusion and belonging? What piece of you do you keep quiet about here because you feel like it doesn’t quite fit? What can you do to learn and share more about the other differences that already exist here, but have stayed hidden beneath expectations about who’s here and who’s not?

We are called, as Unitarian Universalists, to be more than simply friendly and good people. We are called to practice welcome, and take that practice out into the world. So thank you for joining me in this practice. Because it is truly one of the most holy, life-changing, and world-changing things that we can do together.

Amen, ashe, and blessed be.