

"Learning As We Go"

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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<https://firstunitarian.org/assembly-october-14-learning-as-we-go/>

When I was in college, our campus had two competing independent daily student newspapers. I wound up joining the more left-leaning of the two, the one that had a picture of Vladimir Lenin hanging above the opinion desk. Vladimir was on the same wall as a large poster of Madonna, who was decked out in leather and, like much of the newspaper staff, smoking a cigarette. It was quite a newsroom. I was not in any way a radical, but I worked there throughout my undergrad years and even served as the paper's editor. Being around dozens of smart, highly opinionated people and attending hours of meetings every week helped prepare me for both journalism and the career that followed. I learned how to put out a newspaper, and I learned more than a few things about life.

During my time on the paper, a group of young women on staff got together and formed a women's caucus. They spelled women "w-o-m-y-n," and they met once a week. I don't recall whether there was a specific incident that led to the formation of the caucus, and I don't know what they talked about. But I saw it as a very good thing that they were getting together for conversation and mutual support as they trained for a male-dominated profession in a male-dominated world.

I was pretty sure that their discussions would have been more interesting to me than the political and sports banter in the rest of the newsroom, but I did not try to invite myself in. I respected their need for safer space, their need for sanctuary. I'll never forget when one of them told me, "Jim, if we allowed men in, you'd be first." I consider that to be just about the highest honor I received during my college career.

Our theme this month at FUS is sanctuary, and we're exploring it from our humanist perspective. What are the places that are of highest importance to us? What are the places that are our human-determined version of sacred? And where in our lives can we go to be safe, or at least safer? Often, the places that are sacred to us are also the places that are safer for us. The sanctuaries in our lives tend to meet at least a couple of definitions of the word "sanctuary."

Unitarian Universalist congregations have a long tradition of aspiring to be both kinds of sanctuary. When Unitarian and Universalist churches got their start in this country more than two centuries ago, they were holy sanctuaries in the traditional, churchy

sense, and they were also places of refuge for those who had radically atypical views on religion.

Back then, the newly emerging Universalists read the Bible with new interpretive methods and saw a much more expansively loving God, rather than the narrow, condemning God so popular at the time (and still popular today). Around the same time, the Unitarians read the Bible and saw a much more human Jesus, a teacher to be followed rather than a savior to be worshiped. Both these traditions drew in people who had nowhere else to take their radical beliefs if they wanted community. And both traditions offered them a place to think freely and to decide for themselves what was most sacred.

Of course, these traditions, while forward-thinking for their time, were also very much of their time. White wealthy men were the safest in these spaces, and they ran the show. Women who were interested in becoming ministers did not get the encouragement they deserved (though they got more support out here in the West than they did back east).

And some of you may be familiar with the story of William Jackson, an African-American minister who in 1860 discovered himself to be, theologically, a Unitarian. He carefully but enthusiastically went to a national conference of Unitarians taking place in his town, and standing before those gathered, he declared himself a Unitarian. The other ministers in attendance took up a collection for Jackson to help him with his church's debt. And then they sent him on his way, with no further welcome or encouragement.

Ever since then, to varying degrees, Unitarian Universalist congregations have struggled to be safer spaces for people of color. They've also struggled with a tendency to want to help communities in need while also keeping them at arm's length, rather than the more complex work of entering into true partnership. (There's actually been significant progress on this in recent years, here and elsewhere, of learning how to minister *with* communities rather than ministering *to* them.)

If you've attended one of my classes on the history of African-Americans and Unitarian Universalists, this next part will be a bit of review. I want to briefly talk about what is known as the [Black Empowerment Controversy](#), because in many ways it's a story about sanctuary. And it's a useful story whether or not you strongly identify as a UU.

In the late 1960s, there was a whole cascade of events around the role of the growing number of African-Americans in Unitarian Universalism, and how they might be supported, and also about how Unitarian Universalists might respond to riots and other social problems resulting from racism. At a national meeting of UUs held in 1967 in New York to address some of these matters, about three dozen black UUs decided that they needed to step out and have their own meeting. Their experience of the riots, which left black neighborhoods in a number of cities around the country in ruins, was very different, much more personal and raw, from the experience the white UUs were having. And the experience of black members of UU congregations was also very different. So they needed their own space to talk and figure out what steps should be taken.

This probably makes sense to those of us in this room now, but back then, their departure, however temporary, was perceived by many as segregation. Well-meaning white people didn't really get the idea of safer space, and they weren't used to having a door closed to them. This is one reason that some people now refer to the Black Empowerment Controversy as the White Entitlement Controversy, because enough white people put their own opinions ahead of the needs of the African-Americans.

There's been some improvement over the years in the acceptance of the idea of safer space, the idea that smaller groups of people may need to step out of the mainstream to be fully empowered and fully themselves. Here at FUS, we have had a Women's Awareness Group for decades so that women can share the stories of their lives and form deeper relationships without the negative impact of a gender power dynamic. We now have a Men's Support Group that meets monthly, for those who are male-identified and wish to share in a supportive, all-male space away from toxic masculinity and away from dominant messages that equate vulnerability with weakness.

Over at First Universalist Church, our sibling congregation two miles to the south, there's a People of Color Circle, a safer space for nonwhite UUs to talk about their experiences in their church and in the world. This circle has extended a standing invitation to our folks of color at FUS, as our lower numbers over here would make it challenging for us to sustain our own such group. (Though if you are a person of color here and you would like to see FUS start its own group, please talk to me and let's see what we can do to make it happen.)

The quote atop your order of service this morning is by me. (I couldn't find one that I liked in the time available, so I wrote one myself.) It says that "Sanctuary is a variation on freedom." The idea is that places of sanctuary provide a version of freedom, but

we should be careful not to confuse them with true freedom. Let me share an illustration of what I mean.

When I first moved to Minnesota 25 years ago, I started attending the Twin Cities Pride Festival. I loved being in Loring Park for that weekend, because I was free from worry about what might happen to me for being gay. Pride was for me a sanctuary, a break from fear, a chance to not have to monitor what I was saying or worry about homophobia. Plus, I was white and male, so I was also free from being on the receiving end of racism or sexism. It was quite a liberating place to be.

And I remember very clearly what it felt like at the end of that weekend, as the tents and banners were coming down. I remember walking away from the park, feeling my guard going back up, re-entering the world where a majority of people didn't support GLBTQ equality. I remember being very aware of whatever T-shirt or stickers I was wearing - GLBTQ messages were fine in the park, but what if I stopped at the store? Or should I go home and change first? The warm sense of sanctuary felt like it was evaporating right off my skin, leaving behind a chill.

I still had significant privilege -- unlike my siblings of color, for example, I had the privilege of hiding my difference. I could simply watch what I said and change my shirt. But I think this demonstrates what I mean by sanctuary as a variation on freedom. The Pride festival was safer and a sanctuary, but it didn't last and it wasn't real life. Often places of sanctuary offer a freedom that is limited; it is not the same as being free.

Still, our personal sanctuaries serve a necessary function. They provide a place to be safer and recharge, and they help us envision the world we'd like to live in. A lot of people come here, to this space, to this congregation, in search of sanctuary, and they have for a very long time. Like those white Unitarians of the 19th century who found each other and built communities, many atheists, agnostics, and humanists of the 20th and 21st centuries have come here for a measure of safety and acceptance not always available in their everyday lives, even now.

How do we make this place a safer harbor for a broader range of people? How do we make FUS more of a sanctuary? This may seem like an inwardly focused question to be asking at this moment in history, when the outside world seems to be hurting everywhere, and our country's functioning as a democracy is at grave risk. But it is precisely at times like these that we each need our sanctuaries, our places that are important to us and safer for us. It is at times like this that we need our forward-thinking institutions to be strong.

One of the ways that we make this congregation stronger and safer is through covenant. Covenant is a long tradition going back more than 300 years in our religious lineage. Covenant can seem like a suspect word - restrictive covenants, for example, kept black people from buying homes in white areas until such covenants were outlawed. And people who are wary of the Bible may be aware that it contains numerous covenants between God and humanity. But the word itself is not religious; its Latin roots are similar to those of the word "convene." Covenant basically means an agreement, and Unitarian Universalists use covenant to describe how we agree to be with each other, how we will treat each other and act as a community.

Each week at FUS we read a congregational covenant adapted from one written more than 100 years ago by Unitarian minister James Vila Blake. That covenant calls on us "to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another." These are terrific goals, ones that I've never heard anyone here object to. And the weekly reminder to strive to be our best selves is worth having in these soul-trying times, when we are tired and a little crispy. We are a covenantal people.

But what happens when we, in all our human-ness, fall short? What do we do when we fail to dwell together in peace, or when someone in the congregation seeks the truth but skips the love?

Sometimes when things go wrong, when we fail to be our best selves, people hold themselves accountable - they apologize and make amends. But - and it pains me to say this in a congregation where I see so much joy and where there is overwhelmingly positive energy - but with unfortunate regularity, when congregants here fail to dwell together in peace, nothing happens to restore the relationship. A person who caused hurt or engaged in hostile behavior may not want to admit it; a person who felt hurt may be ashamed as well. This is Minnesota; if we don't talk about it, it didn't happen. Except it did. And so the hurt individuals start to stay away, or leave altogether, because there's no clear alternative path forward.

It shouldn't have to be this way. A covenant is only as strong as each person's willingness to do the work of healing and restoring right relationship - to stay at the table, to admit mistakes, to apologize, and to forgive. Without accountability and commitment, a covenant is diminished and can become little more than wishful thinking. It seems like smart human beings could come up with a better way.

In fact, they have. And one of the things that's happening at FUS, right now, is the creation of a Healthy Congregation Task Force.

Lots of UU congregations have these task forces and teams, because these congregations also are filled with imperfect human beings who sometimes mess up, because these congregations want to be places that are a safer space for more people. UU congregations of all kinds have a history of confusing the acceptance of a wide range of beliefs with the acceptance of any kind of behavior, even hostile behavior. And these kinds of teams help provide a place for members to take steps when there's conflict. They work, too. I know one minister who said he's got a great healthy congregations team but they now have so little to do. That's a fantastic outcome.

The task force that will be meeting here starting this month will certainly not be bored at first. Their charge includes:

- Looking at best practices for handling conflicts that arise.
- Finding out what sorts of detailed covenants and right-relations policies are in place elsewhere.
- Being aware of how members of less-powerful groups, such as women and people of color, experience the congregation differently.
- Coming up with a framework for a permanent Healthy Congregations team and processes for its use.

I'll be at their first meeting to help get the ball rolling but will mostly just have a supportive role. That's because for congregational health to truly thrive and endure, it has to be rooted in the membership, rather than the ministers. The Task Force plans to have recommendations by the time of our annual meeting in May, and I think we will all be grateful for their work.

It's a small piece of building the world that some of us dream about. A world in which sanctuary spaces are more widely available, and where more of the everyday world feels like safer space. This is the work of generations, but progress does not seem impossible to me, because I've had a taste of this kind of progress myself.

These days, compared with 25 years ago, when I walk away from the Pride festival, I no longer think twice about what kind of message might be on my T-shirt, because the world has spun forward leaps and bounds, at least around GLBTQ equality, and at least in this corner of the world. Homophobia doesn't have the deeply entrenched, foundational history in this country that white supremacy and misogyny do. So think it's been easier to reduce, in part because our economic system has never relied on homophobia. But progress on any kind of xenophobia gives me a bit of hope for humanity.

I see hope here within these walls as well, for opening our doors wider, for moving from enthusiastic welcome to deeper invitation and true inclusion. I posed this question a year ago, and I'll pose it again: "What would it be like if every kind-hearted humanist who came through our doors could find a place here?"

Put another way, what might we need to do for more people to see this as their sacred space and their safer space - a sanctuary and a sanctuary? With our board working on an updated vision for FUS' role in the world and in the lives of the people who come here, and with FUS digging deeply into racial justice work, it's a good time to ask.