

## Acceptance of One Another©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As we heard in our reading this morning, we Unitarian Universalists generally understand that each of us is unique in the ways we think, believe, taste, feel, hear or encounter life. An initial response to this might be, “well of course, SOOO?” Taking time to consider this basic understanding more deeply though, we can recognize it holds considerable significance. As I have mentioned numerous times since arriving here, ours is a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. That means that as a Unitarian Universalist congregation no one is required to hold a specific belief.

In contrast, some religious traditions require that each member acknowledge belief in a specific written statement called a creed. In other words all members must believe the same thing in some particular area. If a person in such a tradition makes it known they have a belief that doesn't coincide with the creed, they can find themselves being chastised or even forced out of the community, all because they believe differently. That is not the case within Unitarian Universalism. As Carolyn Owen-Towle asserts, “It is our very differences that make it necessary to practice acceptance toward one another.” She then goes on, in typical UU fashion, to ask a question. But it isn't some run of the mill question. It is a challenging question, a question that goes to the very core of our Third Principle. And it is a question that can be very difficult to answer. She asks, “But just how accepting do I have to be?” Her question puts front and center one of the things I find appealing about our faith. As Unitarian Universalists we not only tolerate such questions, we actually encourage them.

As I consider the question of just how accepting I have to be, I experience a wide range of feelings, including some that are unpleasant. Some of the unpleasant feelings are tied to two specific situations where I had to find an answer to this question —situations with two specific people I have known during my course of service as a minister to a number of Unitarian Universalist congregations. It is my hope that what I am about to share will generate both deep reflection as well as conversation among us about how accepting we ought to be.

The first person I thought of was a UU minister colleague. I met this colleague while we were both serving a congregation almost three times the size of our Fellowship here. In that setting, both of us worked under the direction of the congregation's Senior Minister. My colleague had some very significant physical limitations. They were unable to walk and had a moderate to severe speech impediment. Their physical limitations, however, had no apparent influence on how I, the Senior Minister or the congregation related to them. The congregation accepted this minister with open minds and open hearts.

One day as the two of us were chatting at a coffee shop, my colleague began sharing about a wedding they recently officiated at. Such a discussion is common between ministers. At a certain point in the conversation however, I began to feel uncomfortable. That point was when my colleague began talking about their romantic interest in one member of the couple they had just married. And my discomfort became shock and dismay as they began telling me they were planning to contact this person to explore the romantic possibilities they hoped might develop.

At that point I interrupted my colleague and let them know the actions they were talking about would be a violation of our UU Ministers' Code of Ethics. I told them I would need to inform the Senior Minister of what I had just heard. Then, I encouraged my colleague not to wait for me to tell the Senior Minister but to do so themselves, and to do so as soon as possible. The colleague agreed to consider my suggestion but made no commitment to act on it.

Shortly after the meeting ended I sent a request to the Senior Minister asking to get together as soon as possible. My mind kept going over and over what I had heard. I was anxious as I began telling the Senior Minister my concerns about what my colleague had said. My concerns were not only confirmed, they were compounded, when I learned that our colleague had recently engaged in a sexual relationship with a member of the congregation—a married member of the congregation no less.

It was clear to both the Senior Minister and myself that our colleague's behavior had to be reported to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee is the body that adjudicates violations of the Code of Ethics by anyone who has been granted Fellowship as a UU minister. The Senior Minister and I each felt it was our responsibility to protect the members and friends of the congregation from any further harm. We recognized this behavior for what it was, an abuse of a position of power.

After the report was made, it took the Ministerial Fellowship Committee several months to make a decision on this matter. The result was that our colleague's Fellowship status was revoked. And the Committee instructed the colleague to have no further contact with any member or friend of the congregation. This was a painful and difficult situation for everyone involved.

The second situation occurred more recently and involved a person who regularly attended a congregation I served as minister. This person would often arrive near the end of the service, often just in time to share during Joys and Concerns. The person was well known in the community and had experienced significant difficulties with many organizations in the community. The congregation was open and accepting of this person even when they would act in ways that would typically be considered outside the bounds of typical societal norms.

But there came a point at which this person's behavior posed a significant threat to the congregation. The point came after the person became a candidate for Mayor of the city. One day during Joys and Concerns the person launched into a political speech and began telling what they would do if they were elected Mayor. That congregation, just like this congregation, has been granted tax-exempt status by the IRS. And the IRS is very clear that churches and other such tax-exempt organizations cannot support or oppose a candidate for public office. Here is a quote from an IRS publication on this issue; "organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office." That is pretty clear. This person's behavior posed a threat to the congregation's tax exempt status.

But when the person was asked to stop making political pitches or talking about their candidacy for Mayor during services they claimed their behavior wasn't a problem. It may not have been a problem for them, but it definitely was a problem for the congregation. Eventually the Board was forced to notify the person that they were

not welcome on the premises until they could agree to abide by the request not to engage in behavior that posed a threat to the congregations ability to exist.

In both of these situations, it was not the person who was unacceptable, it was their behavior. Each of them had crossed a line and each of them were involved in activities that either caused harm or posed a very real possibility of causing harm. In both situations the person who had crossed the line was specifically told how they had crossed the line and what they needed to do to stay within the bounds of acceptable behavior. In each case, they made it known that they would not agree to or abide by what was being asked of them. In each case, I feel that I found a way to accept them as the people they were, while not accepting or enabling their behavior which was out of bounds.

I will admit that it still isn't crystal clear to me exactly where the line between what I ought to accept and what I ought not to accept lies. I think that is probably because I still have considerably more to learn about acceptance. While I have considerably more to learn, here is a bit of what I have found so far. I know that what a person does is not the same as who a person is. I know that it is important to accept the person even when they have done something I find unacceptable. I have discovered that I can and usually do care about and feel compassion for a person even when they act in a way that I perceive to be inappropriate. In short, I have learned that I can be unaccepting of a person's behavior and still accept the person. This, to me, is what our Principle of acceptance of one another is really calling us to do. It isn't suggesting that we accept everything and hold an attitude of "whatever." It is asking us to carefully and compassionately discern **what** is and is not acceptable and to recognize that the question is not and never will be **who** is or is not acceptable. As such, our Third Principle of acceptance is firmly grounded in the First and Second Principles that precede it, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

As we go forth today, may we remember that in our own lives there were those who loved and accepted us for who we were even when our behavior was beyond the bounds of what was appropriate or acceptable. And with that awareness, may we all stand on the side of love as we strive to accept each person we meet for who they are, wondrous bundles of life who are imperfect just as we ourselves are imperfect.

May it be so.