

To Be an Ally

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
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Last June, with many others from this congregation, I traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, for Justice General Assembly, a gathering of Unitarian Universalists dedicated to living our faith to create a more fair and compassionate society.

There I attended a workshop called “Beloved Conversations: Meditations on Race and Ethnicity,” led by Dr. Mark Hicks, author of *Building the World We Dream About*, the antiracism curriculum we’ve used here at First Parish.

Mark showed us a video by Derald Wing Sue on “Microaggressions,” the repeated slights, stereotypes, and oblivious insults, trivial sometimes in isolation but demoralizing in the aggregate, that historically marginalized people constantly endure.

Mark then presented a “Theater of Microaggressions” featuring a fictional student named Cindy, all of whose family excel at math and science—except Cindy.

Directed by Mark, volunteers circled Cindy faster and faster and faster, repeating things like: “I can’t believe you’re not good at math.” “You must be proud of your sister winning the science prize.” “Are you adopted?”

No one asked Cindy about her thoughts or feelings. Instead, they objectified her as an inexplicable anomaly in her otherwise brilliant family.

It was painful to watch.

Afterward, Mark invited the volunteer actors to share their experience of what had happened, and then the audience to share ours.

Unitarian Universalists quickly lined up at the microphone to say how powerful the exercise had been, how terribly Cindy had been treated, how much they had learned.

A minister from Massachusetts, an older white, European-American woman, commented on the constant repetition of the hurtful comments. “It’s like Chinese water torture,” she said.

“Chinese water torture.” A familiar expression I’m sure I’ve used myself to convey the drip-drip-drip of cumulative harm.

But this time something about it didn’t sound right.

Maybe it’s because my daughter Lucy is Chinese, adopted as a baby eight years ago.

Maybe it's because we were in a workshop on multicultural competence.

Seated nearby was Karin Lin, Co-chair of our Transformation Team and a Taiwanese American. I leaned toward her and asked quietly, "Is Chinese water torture actually Chinese?"

"I don't know," she answered.

Also nearby was my friend Nancy Palmer Jones, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Church of San José. Overhearing my question, she interjected, "Someone should say something."

I knew that "someone" was me.

As I waited my turn in line, I grew more and more anxious. How could I lovingly raise the issue of ethnic stereotyping without seeming self-righteous, or worse, humiliating my Massachusetts colleague?

When I reached the microphone, my voice faltering a little, I said, "In the spirit of I-statements, I want to say that my heart is pounding right now. I want to be a good ally, but we're all finding our way here. I know that French toast isn't French, and English muffins aren't English. I don't know if Chinese water torture is Chinese."

At this point I was interrupted by applause—not from everyone, but not just from a handful of people, either.

"And even if it is," I continued, "even if there's some history there, it would probably be good to find another expression to say the same thing."

As soon as the workshop ended, I made a beeline for my colleague to say I didn't mean to embarrass her, even though I knew I had. She was very gracious acknowledging her mistake. We had a good conversation and parted warmly.

Of course, I could have spoken to her privately without making a public comment, but that would have left the stereotype in place and the people of color in the room unsupported.

It turns out the expression "Chinese water torture" has no basis in China. It's been linked to Harry Houdini's escape act of a century ago and the Fu Manchu adventure stories of the 1930s. Of course, it defames Asians as devious, cruel, and fundamentally different from us—"us" meaning good white Americans who would never do anything so dastardly.

My speaking up at the workshop wasn't a big deal. It carried no physical risk and little social risk.

But in a world of microaggressions, it offered, perhaps, a moment of micropeace.

To be an ally is not about political correctness.

It's about the sacred bond between us as human beings, a bond unbreakable but so often frayed or forgotten in fear, confusion, and ignorance.

To be an ally means devotion to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to see our common humanity gleaming through the scar tissue of oppression, and to champion it against every assault.

It means living the principle that a threat to freedom anywhere is a threat to freedom everywhere, and that none of us is free until all are free.

It means looking into the eyes of a stranger, deeply and without turning away, until I see myself.

“Ally” isn't a title I can claim. It's a role I try to play as effectively as I can. How well I succeed isn't for me to judge, but for those whom I strive to support, and to whom I need to listen attentively.

How can I be an effective ally to another person?

The most important thing, I think, is also the hardest.

To be an effective ally, I need to love myself.

Whatever our class, color, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, or circumstance, almost everyone enjoys some form of privilege in comparison with somebody else. When we become aware of our privilege, we may feel profound guilt and shame about it, which can motivate us to help others but hamper us when we try.

But as the working class feminist author Tillie Olsen observed, “the only thing wrong with privilege is that most people don't have it.” I did not ask for my privilege any more than anyone asks for oppression.

My task as a privileged person is not to feel ashamed of my privilege—that's too easy—but to use privilege to dismantle privilege—to build the Beloved Community.

Shame shuts us down. Love opens and activates us.

To be an ally is to risk making mistakes.

The National Coalition Building Institute, which leads workshops on diversity and prejudice-reduction, defines an ally as “someone who makes a mistake and sticks around to clean it up.”

To be an ally is to listen—to listen with an open mind and heart, without judgment or preconceptions. To understand another’s struggle I need to hear their story, because story illumines the soul and touches the conscience in ways no social theory or statistical analysis can.

To truly understand other people we have to get to know them, not as spokespersons for an entire race or class, but as individuals, miraculous and flawed as we are.

Building and sustaining relationships with people of different circumstances is not always easy. We must accept our own awkwardness, face our fear of rejection, and make ourselves vulnerable.

In their beautiful song “Windows of the Heart,” Kim and Reggie Harris sang last night:

*So much lies broken between us
Lines of connection down
Standing in ruins of pain and mistrust
Searching for common ground.*

*So we stumble through our points of view
Logic falls apart.
In that moment of confusion we see a place to start
Through the windows of the heart.*

Personal relationships across social boundaries do not merely deepen understanding. They defend against tyranny.

When the Nazis came to arrest Jews in countries segregated by religion, Jews often felt they had nowhere to turn. But in Denmark, where many Jews and Christians were friends, Jews looked to their friends for help, and Christians refused to tolerate their friends’ persecution.

Today in this country, polls show that heterosexual support for gay rights is highest among those who know gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and queer folk personally, and lowest among those who *think* they don’t.

When we have heard, really heard, another’s story, we can ask perhaps the most important question of all: How can I support you?

One way to support another is to embrace, nourish, and defer to their leadership. Those of us who are used to leading, to holding the floor, to seizing the spotlight, need to step

back, shut up, and experience being a follower instead of a leader for a change. We might learn something.

We might learn a lot.

Listening does not mean agreeing.

Cherie Brown, director of the National Coalition Building Institute, was sharing the stage with an Arab colleague discussing Arab-Jewish cooperation in a packed auditorium. During her talk, Cherie said she was proud of Israel.

A shout from the rear of the hall cut her off. “How dare you be proud of Israel!”

It was a Lebanese woman who had worked in the PLO camps in southern Lebanon. She was in the United States to undergo surgery that might repair her hearing, which had been damaged by Israeli bombs. For fifteen minutes she unleashed a blistering litany of all the atrocities for which she held Israel responsible. Most painful to Cherie were echoes of ancient charges used through the ages to attack Jews.

But Cherie did not interrupt her, did not ask her to sit down in the interest of time. She did not attempt to refute the woman’s arguments. She listened, because she believed the most important thing she could do at that moment was to model being a Jewish woman who wanted to listen to an Arab woman.

Finally the woman finished.

She paused and looked at Cherie as though seeing her for the first time. When she spoke again her voice was softer. “You’re the first Jewish person who has ever listened to me. Can we meet for lunch?”

They did.

And they went on to work together leading some of the first sessions ever held between Israeli Jews and members of the PLO. You can bet they did not agree on everything. But in the fertile soil of listening, respect and trust took root.

*We feel the anger, this desperation
To turn this world around
Each of our faces a mirror
Searching for common ground*

*So we lower our defenses
Watch them fall apart
In that moment of communion we see a place to start
Through the windows of the heart.*

Not everyone appreciates the concept of ally. Some hear it as condescending or demeaning to marginalized people, implying they're dependent on a helping hand from the powerful.

But Elon James White, host of the radio show *This Week in Blackness*, says simply, "We need allies. The marginalized can't be left to speak up for themselves every time."

White offers what he calls "The EJW Super-Simple Ally Rules." If you remember nothing else from my sermon, remember these:

1. *Speak out* when you can. Speak out even if it may be uncomfortable.
2. *Seek counsel* from the group for which you're being an Ally. Listen to their critiques. Try to understand . . .
3. . . . and when you don't, simply *be quiet* until you do.

Speak out. Seek counsel. Be quiet.

An organization that takes these rules seriously is Allies for Racial Equity, or ARE (<https://sites.google.com/site/uualliesre/>).

ARE's "mission is to confront racism in ways that are accountable to communities of color and by creating opportunities for white [Unitarian Universalists] to understand white privilege and unlearn white supremacy."

Among its other activities, at every General Assembly ARE sets up its table right next to the table of DRUUMM (<http://druumm.onefireplace.org/>), the organization representing Unitarian Universalists of color. Whenever a white person approaches the DRUUMM table and asks why an organization like DRUUMM is necessary, they are politely directed to the ARE table, where white allies are glad to have that conversation, thereby relieving the DRUUMM folks of one more educational effort they might not have the energy or the patience for at that particular moment.

Being an ally demands courage—the courage to risk not only scorn and ostracization by dominant social groups, but also testing and criticism from those we seek to support.

In the parable told by Jesus, a Samaritan comes to the aid of a stranger left half-dead by robbers. The Samaritan is himself a foreigner despised in those parts. He risks misinterpretation of his actions by onlookers and contempt from the very person he aids.

But he does not pause to agonize that his generosity may be misunderstood. He does not know what trail of travail or trauma has led the stranger to his bed of dust and blood by the side of the road. There is no time to inquire. He sees the need for action, and he acts.

We need the courage of the Samaritan to reach across our borders and heal the festering wounds of prejudice, hatred, and violence.

To do this we must love justice more than comfort, peace more than passivity.

Our journey toward wholeness will continue long after we die. But any one of us, any time, can take the first awkward steps to be an ally.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction from “In the Shelter of Each Other” by Reggie Harris

Many times the pain of the world crashes in.
We feel broken and betrayed.
We start to lose our sense of joy,
Our sense of connection. . . .
But in the shelter of each other,
In the shelter of our lives,
We are open, we are dreaming
We are hopeful, we are wise.