

Do You Fear What I Fear?

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It was only my second deacon's meeting and already I was starting trouble, albeit unintentionally. During the check-in at the start of the meeting I unfurled the day's paper and pushed it into the center of the long table. On the front page was an archbishop from another denomination in full vestments sporting a particularly fearsome scowl.

"This", I began - poking at the newspaper with my index finger. "This is on my mind!" The headline, which I no longer remember, had something to do with religious opposition to gay marriage which was being debated at the time in the Connecticut legislature.

Being gay, and by my mid-thirties, fed up with being treated or talked about as if people like me were some sort of social disease to be contained, I was upset by the article. My fellow deacons, most of whom I barely knew at this point, were sympathetic, save for one...our chairperson. We'll call her Jane, though that's not her real name. Jane didn't say anything, but instead just looked at me. The way one might look at an opponent in order to try to intimidate them.

Later, a mutual friend and fellow deacon described Jane as, "homophobic" and noted that she didn't believe in gay marriage. And so I was surprised when the person who normally hosted the deacon's Christmas party had to back out and I offered to host, the offer was accepted.

Kevin, my husband for whom anything less than over the top just won't do, ensured the party was the most fabulous deacon's Christmas party in years. At some point in the evening I went into my study to grab a book or card I wanted to show someone. As I turned around to leave the room and rejoin the party I was startled to discover Jane standing just inside the doorway. Her eyes tearful. Slowly she smiled and began to speak, "Thank you.", she said. "You have opened my eyes." She went on to explain she really didn't know what to expect to see or find out by coming to the party, but what she realized was, Kevin and I were pretty much like any other couple. Whatever she had thought or feared we were was laid to rest.

The experience left me keenly aware that one person's orthodoxy is another's heresy. Which is to say, people have different beliefs (right and wrong) about all kinds of things. Some are quite powerful and serious...like religious, cultural and political beliefs. And others not so serious... like which ice cream flavor is the best or whether Snapchat is better than Instagram.

Differences over ice cream or apps aren't likely to cause us too much distress, but as my story with Jane and that of our young friend Michael from, "Elijah's Angel", reminds us, when our differences are about more serious things, it can make us uncomfortable, even fearful.

While discomfort or fear can be useful to help us make a needed change in our lives or protect us from danger, it can also be used to erect barriers that limit our understanding of others and ourselves.

Perhaps this is why, "Fear Not" or "Do not be afraid" is among the most frequently issued command in the Bible. The biblical writers knew fear as a powerful, daily reality in human life. Thus, "fear not" is not intended as a denial of that reality, but a reminder that fear can and often does get in the way, stopping us, and our lives in our tracks. "Fear not" then is really a call to depart from positions or points of view held in fear, lest our spiritual...indeed our life's journey be cut short.

Not that this is easy. It isn't. It is far easier to settle into the familiar than risk the possibility and consequences of change which come with moving past fear. And the risk is real. And so a question we may carry as people who gather to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning is, What could happen if we moved past fear when we encounter heretical ideas and beliefs, that is, ideas and beliefs at odds with our own?

The story with Jane offers us one possibility. Now, I'm sure Jane could have lived quite contently believing whatever it was she believed about gay people and remained opposed to gay marriage. Yet, she risked, whether she knew it or not, her orthodoxy or belief by attending a Christmas party hosted by a gay couple, a relationship that was totally heretical or at odds with her beliefs. Before the night was over, she found herself saying to me, "You have opened my eyes." Though she thanked and credited me with opening her eyes, it is she who deserves the credit.

Had she let fear hold her back and not attend, she wouldn't have had that experience. I don't pretend to know what went on in her heart and mind, and things don't always work out this way, but what I do know is that when she chose to "fear not", transformation happened. And each of us gained a friend.

Friendship was never in question with Michael and Elijah from our story for all ages this morning. Clearly they were friends and each greatly admired the other. But they were of different faith traditions. Which wasn't really a problem until it was... until the day Elijah gifted Michael with the carving of an angel. Neither of them perhaps realized the angel might mean something different to the other and their respective faith traditions.

As the story goes, even though he likes the carving, Michael worries that it is forbidden by his religion. And we can almost feel the anxiety of Michael's uncertainty as he first hides the angel, then moves it to different spots in his room and finally pushes past his worry and fear and thrusts it at his parents. To his, and perhaps some reader's surprise, his parents don't recoil in horror or scold him for bringing it into the house.

Instead they admire it and place it next to their menorah and we, along with Micheal are reminded, in the spirit of words credited to the 16th century Unitarian preacher Francis David, "We need not think alike to love alike." Indeed, when Michael stepped past his fear at his family's Chanukah celebration, Michael's religious faith matured and was deepened. Something we maybe weren't sure about for Elijah initially, but which is confirmed when we read of the menorah Micheal's family gave him, being lit in his window.

The possibility of transformation. A deeper, more mature faith. These are pretty good reasons to embark or continue on the spiritual journey with a healthy skepticism of fear. And reasons I think especially important to us, as Unitarian Universalists to keep in mind.

You see, we Unitarian Universalists can sometimes get too caught up in defining ourselves and our faith in opposition to other religions and beliefs...that's our heretical roots, where we chose a different path. But opposition can sometimes become too much our own form of orthodoxy, where the question, "Do you fear what I fear? becomes our common bond leading us to adopt an attitude that it is others, not us, who are in need of transformation... and preferably by reason alone. Or that we are more evolved simply because we gave up supernatural theism, belief in a distant, separate God who intervenes at will in human activity, a long time ago. These are barriers, reinforced by fear, that can cut our own journey short and cut others out altogether.

Imagine for a moment if instead of hosting the deacon's Christmas party I decided to try reasoning with Jane certain that in doing so she'd see the error (i.e. irrationality) of her ways. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad there are civil rights lawyers who take this approach in court, but in our day to day lives reason alone can't forge a path to the heart. As irrational as it seems, the heart more than the

mind, is the locus of lasting transformation. Perhaps this is why the 19th C. Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, said, “May your life preach more loudly than your lips.”

And how different Michael and Elijah’s story might have turned out if Michael had turned down or returned Elijah’s gift because he and his parents could find no other meaning in it other than as a graven image distasteful and forbidden in their religion...a symbol only of something they didn’t or couldn’t believe in. How might that have affected their friendship? What message would it have sent or stereotype it reinforce concerning religion and what it means to be a person of faith? The late Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams reminded us, “Church is a place where we get to practice what it means to be human.” It is not a place to come for a booster shot of self-righteousness when the mood strikes.

Just as sure as daylight will again increase following the Winter Solstice, so too may we be assured there will come a time, many times when we encounter people and ideas that are different in ways great and small, some of which will challenge our own sense of who we are and what we believe. In these lie the possibility...and yes...the risk of transformation and the potential to grow...to mature and deepen our understanding of who we are, what we believe, and how we are called to respond to this awareness. This, in part, is what we covenant toward as Unitarian Universalists and where, regardless of our individual theologies, we witness hope incarnate.

And so in this season of hope and throughout the years, let us heed the wisdom of the ancients and, “Fear Not”, come what may.

Amen and Blessed Be