



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Open Arms, Open Hearts

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Have you ever been mindlessly mulling outside when a butterfly crosses your path? You spy it out of the corner of your eye and inevitably you freeze and stare and gasp, “Oh it’s a butterfly,” quietly because you don’t want to scare it away and you know it is only going to be there for a few seconds. And most of the time, as you’re transfixed by this tiny creature, you cannot help but feel a smile creep over your lips or a tear come to your eye and if you’re really in the moment and really paying attention, you can feel your heart open up as you connect with this tiny, wondrous creature for just a moment. For those ten, maybe twenty seconds you just feel at peace, happy, even joyful. This is often my experience when I am lucky enough to notice a butterfly—I like to think it is universal.

Inevitably when the butterfly disappears, I stand there, still, for a moment longer, breathing deeply trying to make that joy last just a little longer. I make a promise to myself to slow down and notice more butterflies. Really that promise is not about butterflies, but about that physiological feeling—it is about the joy. That I am going to bring that feeling into my regular life. I have said that a lot over the last few years—it has been a busy few years.

Making that promise is also a small admission to myself that I have sacrificed the joy somehow, that I haven’t made enough space for it in my life, that maybe I have let the stress close me off a bit, turning inward and away instead of out and toward.

It turns out this idea has been studied. Amy Cuddy is a social psychologist and associate professor at Harvard Business School. She studies body language and non-verbal communication to investigate how people perceive and influence each other and themselves. She also happens to have the 2nd most watched TED talk on what she coined as “power posing”—so maybe you’ve heard of her. She conducted research that showed how our body language not only determines how others perceive us, especially in high pressure situations like a job interview, but also how our body language determines how we feel about ourselves.

She and her team found a physiological link. In their study, they had people hold a “power pose” for two minutes, alone, before going into a simulated job interview. She had another group hold weaker poses, poses that close you off. The power posing group got hired more often and were perceived as being more warm, trustworthy and competent. But an equally fascinating result was the physiological, hormonal response. The subjects—those who’d done the power poses had an increase in testosterone and a decrease in cortisol, the stress hormone.

She’s not advocating for power posing in the room, but for practicing it privately as a way to kick-start your body, your physiology and your psychology about who you think you are and how you feel in the moment. She calls it, “Fake it, ‘til you make it.” Even when you pretend to be happy by forcing a smile, your body and brain will respond and make you feel happy. When you pretend to feel powerful, you actually become more powerful.

Now I am not just regurgitating Professor Cuddy's TED talk to you. I have had first-hand experience of this—I am a practitioner of her power posing. Her TED talk has become legendary among my fellow colleagues who were all preparing to see our UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. It is during this culminating interview that we potential ministers are cleared for ordination and invited into preliminary fellowship. My interview was just six weeks ago. I watched her video several times and it really stuck with me; it resonated with me and I knew that paying attention to my physical presence in the room would be important.

So there I was in the bathroom of the new UUA headquarters, holding my wonder woman power pose for two minutes. I'll admit, it was totally goofy and I stood in front of the mirror laughing at myself. It must have worked. Yes, I passed, but putting the end result aside, I remember when the interview was over, I thought to myself, "That was kind of fun. I had a good time." I made it a point to pay attention to my body, my posture, my physical openness and I felt grounded, relaxed, and present and yes, more powerful. And I felt more open—physically, yes, but also emotionally, more open and connected to the panel sitting across from me. In a way I had faked it 'til I made it.

It isn't that I didn't believe in myself or feel a calling for this work of ministry, I certainly did. It was more the anxiety and stress of preparing for this final moment of judgment about that purpose that opened up the wells of doubt, uncertainty and fear. I knew I needed to hold that awareness and intentionally work to compensate. Amy Cuddy says it like this, "Let your body tell you you're powerful and deserving, and you become more present, enthusiastic and authentically yourself." Pretty cool, don't you think?

The more you physically open yourself up—notice heart open—the more present, enthusiastic and, I would add, joyful you become. For me this is just like the butterfly effect. When I see that random butterfly, my body kind of naturally opens with the momentary awe. I stand up straighter, my arms open or relax and now I know there is actually a physiological response happening in my body. I can literally create joy in my body.

I have begun to notice and to wonder how this applies to judgment. Because it seems to me that we humans are prone to judgment. We cannot help it, we judge ourselves, we judge others—especially those that are not like us. It is a defense mechanism of sorts, judging keeps us from being too vulnerable, from admitting our own deficits or from truly exploring our inner lives—our spiritual lives.

For us as UUs, judgment is a bit of a paradox. We say we are non-judgmental. We say we are all welcoming, totally inclusive, radically hospitable and I believe that. We really want to be those things, but they take practice. They require intentionality. They require an open heart (literally and figuratively), and sometimes our human nature gets the better of us. We judge.

Michael and I recently had a group of RE teachers over to our house for dinner and during our conversation about teaching and the curriculum, one of them off-handedly asked which of the

seven principles is the hardest for us to practice. Looking down at the paper plates I was using for dinner (because we don't have a dishwasher and I was feeling lazy), I quipped, "Well the 7th" waving the plate in the air. We all laughed and then this same teacher told us that for her the hardest principle was the first—the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We all kind sat there hushed for a moment before conversation resumed. It wasn't until I thought about this a moment later, replaying it in my mind, that I realized what a brave admission it was. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was true for me too. On a grand scale it is easy to say we accept all people, all religions, all identities. It is an aspiration and we should make those aspirational statements. On an individual, personal scale—how do we truly practice that? I mean, what happens when we don't like someone or someone just rubs us the wrong way, pushes all our buttons? What are those judgments we make about how someone looks, dresses, talks, behaves, parents? How about when their politics are different? What are those snap judgments you tend to make?

We all do it. We may not do it intentionally or even consciously, but we do it—one way to tell is by noticing our body language. Are we heart open and powerful in that present, authentic way, (not dominating) or are we closed off and protected? Because I find when I am in the open hearted place, those judgments do not come as often. Maybe it is because my stress hormones are low, my power hormones are up, and the joy is quite literally flooding my brain. There is less room for the disapproval gland to activate.

Like most things worthy of our time and attention in life, this requires practice. It is a kind of spiritual practice. What happens when we are faced with a high stakes moment? If you read the blog post on Wednesday, you read a beautiful reflection from Marie, one of our senior high youth about the invasion of the New Orleans UU church by anti-abortion protestors. Some of you may remember the news coverage—Rachel Maddow did a particularly compelling piece on the story, but I'll refresh our memories.

It was Sunday, July 20, to be exact and the small congregation was nearly full. That Sunday they were joined by a group of twelve UU youth and their adult advisors from the UU College of Social Justice who had just spent a week in an intensive, transformative learning experience looking at issues of race, class, economic inequality and justice. They were fully into their time of prayer and meditation. That Sunday the prayer was specifically lifting up deaths in the congregation as well as peace in the Middle East.

Out of their reflective, communal silence, shouting began. Members from the radical anti-abortion group Operation Save America stood up, ripped open their button up shirts to reveal the message related t-shirts and began shouting things like, "Abomination," and "You're going to hell!"

Hate filled speech. At first, both the minister preaching that day and the worshippers were understandably confused, trying to figure out what was happening.

Now let's pause here for moment. What would you do? What if this were us? This is a horrifying story. The protestors planned this—it really was an invasion. They dressed nicely, walked into the church as if they were new visitors and worshipped for the first half of the service. Then during the most sacred and holy time in worship, they revealed themselves spewing condemnation and hate. There are many of us, myself included, who might need to be restrained from spewing right back at them (or doing so later on Facebook). Not very ministerial, I know.

But this did not happen in New Orleans. Instead, some of the youth, the very same teenagers that had spent a week immersed in justice issues, started grabbing hands and singing, beginning to form a giant circle. They sang Circle Round for Freedom and bit by bit the congregation joined them forming one giant, singing circle.

Try singing it:

Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace, for all of us imprisoned, circle for release. Circle for the planet, circle for each soul, for the children and our children, keep the circle whole.

The minister preaching that day, the Rev. Deanna Vandiver, their affiliated community minister, invited the protesters to stay and worship with them if they could do so respectfully. It does not appear that any took her up on that invitation and they were politely escorted off the property and informed they were trespassing.

Led by the youth, the congregation chose to respond by opening up instead of closing off. Opening their arms to join hands, opening their hearts in song. Imagine the fear and anger and adrenaline coursing through them in that moment, the reptile brain of fight or flight was taking over but they made a different choice. And what do you want to bet that they experienced a physiological shift.

Imagine that for yourself for a moment—opening your arms, holding hands and singing – how does that make you feel? It changes you. It is choosing vulnerability over defense. Surely all those intentional acts of openness, slowed their heart rates, decreased their cortisol. But more than that it centered them, it connected them to something greater than their individual selves. Their actions gave them the time and space to remind themselves who they really were, who they truly wanted to be—and to respond from that place—a people of open arms and open hearts, a people of wide circles where no one stands alone, a people of wondrous love. Theirs was a spiritual act.

Thankfully, we are not all faced with such momentous events in which we must choose to suspend our internal judgments and open ourselves up. For most of us we get to practice doing so in the smaller moments, when co-workers are driving us crazy, when children are being “too wild,” when we feel compelled to point out others’ mistakes. How might we begin

to feel differently about ourselves, and then about others, if we practiced opening up? Can you just picture us on the patio, practicing?

You know, we will have a good opportunity to practice this during candidating week. It's not that we won't have judgments, I am sure we will. We will have deep questions and perhaps some concerns and we will want to feel heard and recognized. But we can push ourselves to begin from a place of openness, a place of joy and authenticity—because that will invite her to do the same. I know that I want to feel like that all the time—like a thousand butterflies flying by. And if we don't feel it all the time, we can fake it 'til we do!

Fr. Greg Boyle names this religious practice as “a calling to delight in one another.” YES! Delight in one another, be curious, notice the butterflies.