



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

What's In A Name?

Lexi Schwede and Linda Doran, Guest
Speakers

August 14, 2016

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Reflection – Lexi Schwede:

As an English teacher, I have taught a lot of Shakespeare. One of my favorite quotes comes from Romeo and Juliet. “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Romeo and Juliet come from two noble families, whom have a well-documented history of conflict. Because of this, it is tradition that neither family has anything to do with the other. Juliet uses this metaphor to argue that, no matter what last name Romeo has, he is the love of her life. So the question remains, what's in a name? If a rose had a different name, would that somehow change our view of it? Does our view of a rose come from the name?

The same question can be asked of any human being. What's in a name? As infants, we are given a name and a gender. Thinking back on when my mom has introduced me, she always say, this is my daughter Lexi. It seems that from birth, our society seems to want to label us in one way or another. Do our impressions and judgments of another human being come from who they are – or their names and labels? A name can be a strong foundation to one's identity. Be it race, gender, or any other kind of label. But what happens if the name, or label, given to someone doesn't actually match the labels they'd give themselves.

Organizationally speaking, labels make sense. They help us to organize everything into nice neat files – that fit into our nice neat filing system. Problem is, what happens if one person's filing system is different than another's? What if the qualifications for one file to be in a certain folder different for one person, than another. I know – this is a very convoluted analogy. (Sorry – the English teacher I me is seeping out...) But this is an important question – are the labels given to a person for the comfort of the person doing the labeling, or the person being labeled? And who decides the right label?

I have struggled with this my whole life. I was three when my parents moved to this country from Venezuela. Both of them come from European descent – which seemed to clash with the Latin American culture. I remember stories about my parents not being accepted, because of the way they looked. So, they thought that moving to the US might have helped that problem. But we ended up in a small town, known to many of its neighbors as “Stepford,” and later, the street we lived on was dubbed “Wysteria Lane.” People had seen very little diversity at that point – especially mixed diversity, as my parents were white and spoke Spanish. So, as you can imagine, especially living on “Wysteria Lane,” all sorts of rumors spread about my family. My dad was apparently a Colombian King Pin. (Parents actually tried to keep their kids away from my sister and I). He was also apparently in the CIA. I remember one particularly ridiculous conversation I had with another student in high school. This student came from a Jewish family. Upon finding out my mom also spoke German, he sought me out to ask me if my parents were Nazis – because apparently that's what his parents had led him to believe. I tried to laugh it off, and said that we had actually moved here from Venezuela. Another

student, also Jewish, piped in with, "Yah. But a whole bunch of those Nazi's escaped to South America. So you could still totally be a descendant of Hitler."

Aside from the obvious historical inaccuracies, the ridiculous assumptions in those few words astounded me. But I remember them to this day. These labels seem superfluous to me now. But I heard them many times growing up. They made me hate being different. They made me want to fit in to the small town New England mold – be "Apple Pie American," as another person had said to me once in high school.

At the same time that these rumors were spreading, I got labeled with a different learning disability almost every year. No one knew how to "handle me," because I had little bits of several different learning differences. The silver lining was that because of all these individualized educational plans mandated by the school board, I had the opportunity to take lots of special classes to help me organize the way my brain worked. But, with the label of "special ed" seemingly stamped across my forehead, I "discovered" ways in which to convince people I was "smart." I learned ways to organize my way into getting good grades.

By the time I got to high school, I was actually considered one of the "smart kids." Everyone wanted my help studying for finals. But in my head, I didn't feel smart. I was just that same stupid child with all those learning disabilities. I had just become really great at covering it up – and seeming smart. And even though school started to become easier, I still convinced myself that it was all an act. I started to become terrified that people would see through this act – see how flawed I was. Towards the end of high school, my obsessive organizing got me yet another diagnosis – OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder. It seemed the world needed to have a clearly defined, diagnosable, label. They NEEDED that label for my file – because how else would I fit into their filing system? The "perfect" image culminated in me being nominated homecoming queen my junior year. All my friends thought this was so cool. But all I remember, is looking into the mirror and thinking, great – something else for me to screw up.

By the time I was in college, I had convinced myself that the only way to be happy was to maintain this "perfect" image. My friends saw me as the queen bee. My sister saw me as the "golden child," always using the analogy of the squeaky wheel getting the grease. Everyone saw me as the stable one – the one they vented to. I mean, what problems did I have? I was constantly reminded about how good I had it. My family came from a certain amount of money – what did I know about needing money? I was white – so what did I know about racism? My parents were still married – so what did I know about family problems? To the outside world, I appeared to be living the perfect, blessed life – and had no right to complain. At least, this was the image I tried my hardest to portray to people.

The few times I did make a comment about some stressful situation, I was usually quickly reminded that it wasn't as bad as I was making out to be it. And that didn't I realize someone had it worse? I began to hate the "privilege" I came from. It was something that people both praised and denounced, simultaneously. So, trying to find a "happy" medium, I tried to be the stable one, without pushing my "privilege" in peoples' faces.

I led myself to believe that as long as I could keep up this image, everything would work out. So when my personal life started to fall apart, I panicked. It seemed that every time another blow hit me, it was used as a way to show me how good my life was. When my best friend got diagnosed with cancer, I was reminded how lucky I was to be healthy. When my grandmother died, friends would try to lighten the mood by reminding me about the money I now had to get a new car. And when I had an accident, and was in a wheel chair for 6 months, one friend pointed out I was lucky enough to have health care that paid for my physical therapy.

It seemed, that because I was “privileged” I wasn't supposed to have problems. That label made me the stable person. At least in my mind. Who would everyone else go to if I had problems? In my traditional style – which had become almost a ritual at this point – I flashed a smile and pretended that everything was ok.

I even pushed myself through graduate school. Surely, if I brought home straight A's, no one would notice all the other stuff going on? The more pain I felt inside, the more perfect I tried to seem on the outside. As this chasm – between my public and my private persona – grew, I began to hate myself more and more. My lowest point was when I resorted to self-mutilation. I guess I did it as a punishment to myself – for not meeting my own impossible standards.

By the end of grad school, the only thing that seemed to hold my life together was my good grades. But when my personal life started to affect even that one ray of hope, I crashed. I gave up – and almost flunked out of grad school.

I can't remember why I started writing, but I did toward the end of grad school. Movie scripts of all things. I actually wrote out some scenes based on the obstacles I had gone through. Somehow – seeing them on paper let me take a step outside of the labels and the drama – see it from an outside perspective. My best friend at the time found my scripts, and secretly sent them into New York Film Academy. I only found out about it when I got accepted. Coming to their LA campus scared me to death. I knew no one – and was moving into a studio apartment the school set me up with. I remember standing outside the classroom on the first day of classes, terrified I was going to screw up. I decided, in that moment, that I would be as bubbly as I could be. I would say hi to every single person. I took a deep breath and - was oddly shocked to realize that none of them had any idea who I was. They had no preconceived notions of who I was. We were actually on an even footing.

So I decided to be as sociable as I could. And before I knew it, I was Lexi, the crazy, social butterfly. I was carefree – not thinking about my future. Not planning my next phase in life – just having fun.

Well, call it belated rebellion, but this “care-free” label didn't work too well for me either. I thought that I was “cured” because I had stopped the self-mutilation. But all I really did was swap the “goody two shoes” label for the “social butterfly” label. I traded self-mutilation in for drugs and booze. The epitome was my 25th birthday. A house party of 100+ people. I felt super

popular – and rebellious. When, in reality, I only knew 20 people there. A short time after this party, I ran out of money – and had to move home to Boston for a bit. Once again, I was back where I started.

It was at this point that I realized I needed to figure out who I actually was. Not who I thought my parents wanted me to be. Not who I had fooled my Boston or LA friends into thinking I was. I had to find my authentic self.

Fast forward to today. Obviously, I'm back in the Los Angeles area. July 1st was 5 years since I first made that move. I am a completely different person than I was back then. I have teaching job that I love. I have friends that support me – any version of me. And my last birthday – two good friends at a Thai restaurant, and a potluck surprise party at work. Definitely not as grand of a social event. But, at least I knew everyone there. I guess now I just feel – balanced.

I'm telling you this story for two reasons. The first is perhaps slightly selfish. But I figured if I made this proclamation to all of you, maybe it would give all those scary demons in my head less power. However, I have a 2nd reason. I'm hoping that that this story shows one example of how labels can affect people. I have always been jealous of those people who confidently claim a certain label. Be it a certain race, gender, sexuality, personality, faith, or anything else. If you have a label that you whole-heartedly connect with, wear that label proudly. Choose who you want to be – and be that person.

There is only one person who can be authentically you. And if you change that for anyone else, it becomes a make-believe version of you. It becomes the label someone else created for you. So to answer the question I posed the beginning of the sermon – who are “labels” created for? I think the only person who can decide what label you want – is you. If someone labels you something that doesn't quite fit, change the label. Or better yet, throw the label away completely, and go with an air of mystery. I have yet to find a label that I am fully comfortable using for myself. Maybe the only label I need is me – Lexi. And I guess I'm ok with that.

Reflection – Linda Doran:

Good morning.

My name is Linda.

I am an alcoholic.

I am a Unitarian Universalist.

Those are just a few labels that can be used to refer to me.

My alcoholism is not something I generally advertise for reasons of anonymity. As a member of a 12-Step program, if I failed to stay sober, it would be most unfortunate if people thought that meant that 12-Step programs were ineffective. As we say following each closing prayer, the program works if you work it.

What does it mean to be an alcoholic? First off, we're a minority, though perhaps not as small a minority as some people might think – estimates range from 10 to 30 percent of adults in the United States. I suspect the percentage may be lower than that in most Unitarian Universalist congregations. I don't meet many UU's who are, as we sometimes say, "one of us." I have met a few, and they have been very supportive and wonderful examples of how sobriety changes lives.

Make no mistake, alcoholism is a deadly disease. It gets worse, not better, over time. Those of us who get sober generally do so to avoid death or institutions. I got sober after passing out on the concrete floor of the nursing home where my mother was living on a Christmas night. The Pasadena police woke me up. That definitely got my attention. After suffering in pain for the next two days, I decided I needed help.

As described in the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, alcoholism is related to the phenomenon of craving. That means I cannot have just one drink. As soon as alcohol enters my system, I crave more of it. Normal drinkers, or "normies," as we call them, can have just a single glass of wine or one beer and that's it. They might even go out one night and party really hard but they're not going to keep it up. What's more – and to an alcoholic, this is really hard to imagine – they can leave a glass of wine or beer *unfinished* on a table. I have *no idea* what that experience is like. From my earliest memory, if I have one drink, I want more. It's the way I'm wired. Yes, I'm a survivor of a traumatic childhood and probably just want to feel better. Once I start drinking, I won't stop until I'm completely blitzed and pretty much passed out. The next day, I'll wake up with a hangover and swear not to do it again. By evening, guess what – I'm right back at it.

It kind of reminds me of those old television commercials, "Betcha can't eat just one!" Before you know it, somebody's stuffing their face with more cookies or potato chips or whatever. With alcohol, of course, the outcome is an altered state of consciousness and lots of poor judgment and behavior often goes along with that. We alcoholics drink because we like the effect. Alcohol enables us to escape pain in our lives and leave responsibility for it at the door.

This may come as a bit of a surprise to you who are not familiar with 12-Step programs, but it turns out that UU and AA have some things in common when it comes to finding a spiritual path that helps us to be the best people we can be. One of the most important similarities is that in AA we talk about turning our will and our lives over to a God of our own understanding. In AA there is no prerequisite that you believe in any particular God or in any god at all. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. It *is* essential, however, to believe in *a power greater than yourself*. This is important for us alcoholics because, after trying to control our drinking and insisting over and over again, to ourselves and others, that we could handle life on our own terms and then failing miserably again and again, we need a power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity. That's still my favorite step, the Second Step of the 12 Steps: "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." There's a beacon of hope in that statement.

The Big Book suggests, for those of us who have trouble with the idea of God, to think of GOD as an acronym for Group Of Drunks or Good Orderly Direction. But heck, we can pray to the kitchen table if we want. For a while, I had prayerful conversations with a room divider in my office, sort of like a mini-Wailing Wall. I have often used Group of Drunks as my higher power. This is because I know that if I keep going to meetings and being of service and emulating the actions of others in the program, I will stay sober and continue to heal. That's pretty powerful, and it has changed my life.

Here's another similarity between AA and UU. In a way, UU can be thought of as the red-headed stepchild of organized religion and traditional Christian churches (and I need to give credit to my AA sponsor for helping me come up with that description). We're so liberal and open-minded about people's spiritual paths and practices that as we've evolved, we've reached a point where we can't truly be called Christian, though Christianity is a part of our heritage. Our tradition of self-determination on the part of each congregation makes us free to bring in new ideas. Like many others, I belong here because nothing else has worked for me. I am free to find my own spiritual path here, and that works for me.

Just like in AA, I've always been included here regardless of what I believe in a religious or spiritual sense. You've welcomed me at your picnics out on the patio, at Chalice Circles where I've gotten to know you better, in classes and reading groups, at Dining for Dollars events in your homes, in one-on-one meetings with ministers, and so much more. When I've been at my lowest – such as when my mother died or I got laid off and couldn't find employment – I came to church and talked about it and you supported me. You pay me to take care of your pets. Two of you came to my graduation ceremony when I earned my master's degree – no one would have been there otherwise. You invited me into your home for Thanksgiving dinner and for Christmas dinner, where we have warm, wonderful, witty conversations around your dinner table and I feel better than I've felt in years.

Similar to Unitarian Universalist practice, AA's traditions state that every meeting is independent except in matters affecting all of AA. Every meeting is different and if you try a bunch of them, sooner or later you find those that work best for you. I belong to AA because nothing else has worked for me. I've been addicted to jobs, sleep medication, relationships, spending, worrying, perfection, you name it. Every other attempt I have made to be successful or seemingly "normal" in life and to fit in has failed. But when I finally came to believe that I was powerless over alcohol and my life had become unmanageable – the first of the 12 Steps – I had a chance of putting my life back together and beginning to heal from alcoholism and all the other addictive tendencies that just made my life more unmanageable, more painful, and more complicated. I've always felt included in AA. We talk about this at meetings – how we can walk into a meeting of AA and feel like we belong, even though our individual stories are different. We "get" each other instantly. We laugh at things no one else would laugh at. That humor is important – it's good medicine. Normal drinkers don't feel hopelessly different from everyone else right out of the gate, but we alcoholics do, and AA is a place where we can talk about it and learn from each other how to live life on life's terms. Like UU, participation in AA

helps us to heal.

So coming back to the question Lexi posed at the beginning: What will you do with your time here on Earth? I would suggest, and I'm sure most of you would agree, that whatever it is, you do it with love. Ultimately, it's our love and acceptance of one another regardless of our beliefs or paths in life that makes it possible for us to come to Neighborhood Church, to heal, and to become the best people we can be. And, we can do that regardless of the labels that have been attached to us throughout our lives.