



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Being Right and Being in Right Relationship

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My days in NYC were spent navigating etiquette in the subway system. It was important to know when you could squeeze yourself into the car during rush hour, and when to wait for the next car. Squeezing yourself in without enough room caused some serious awkwardness. There you were, packed sardine close enough to feel your neighbor's breath, yet avoiding eye contact with everyone around you who was silently scowling at you. You couldn't un-do the squeeze in—once you made the decision, you were already in and could not turn back. You can imagine that these bad decisions were accentuated by the turn in the seasons—from cups of hot coffee to puffy coats—all adding a dimension of resentment to the car.

On the 210 freeway, there is a different, but related kind of etiquette. The 210 at Lake Avenue both directions and subsequent exits require a delicate dance with your fellow travelers. There are multiple lanes merging, and you have to be very in tune with those cars around you—not squeezing yourself in inappropriately. To do that, you have to vigilantly watch your neighboring cars to see if there is room for you to make your way into the lane. Even with the requisite dark SoCal sunglasses, you have to be able to make eye contact with cars next to you to safely navigate this. I learned this the hard way my first week here when I got in an accident on the 210 at Lake Avenue going east, and since then have approached that intersection with proper caution!

This Thursday I was headed over to my daughter's daycare center and approaching the dreaded Lake Avenue exit. I looked to my right and saw a giant Ford F-150 truck with fully tinted windows. I couldn't see the driver with the windows and height of the cab, but noted the size of the truck and stayed cautiously distant. Falling back behind the truck, I noticed a smattering of red white and blue bumper stickers. Maybe you can guess, but there were multiple Trump/ Pence Make America Great Again stickers. A wave of heat flushed my face as I saw those bumper stickers and I struggled to maintain focus. In my head, I began to tell a story of who this person was.

The car and I remained side by side for several miles. I looked to my right while turning onto Altadena drive to see the truck turning with me. When I finally caught a glimpse of the driver, she was not was not the person I expected to see behind the wheel at all—in my head, perhaps Donald Trump himself, but a small framed woman of color about my age with long dark hair. Her wedding ring sparkled on her finger just like mine did. I started to think she was probably a mother too with that big truck with the extended cab. Maybe she even had a dog too, like me.

Now Altadena drive happens to be the street off of which both my daughter's preschool and Sam's mom's memory care facility are located. As we neared those familiar locations, I found my anxiety getting higher and higher. Were we going to the same place?

I imagined pulling into the parking lot of the daycare facility and getting out of the car together to pick up our kids. I imagined walking into the memory care facility and sitting at the table with her as she visited with her elderly mother.

What would I say to this person?

Finally, as I neared my daughter's daycare, I pulled off Altadena drive while the truck kept going.

I sighed with relief, but remained disturbed at how triggered I had become. In mere seconds, I surprised myself by how quickly I was able to lose sight of the humanity of this mystery person behind the wheel. I parked and sat in the car for a few minutes until my heart rate returned to its normal pace before going in to pick up my daughter.

I share this slightly embarrassing story with you because I wonder how this election season is showing up in your lives. After I wrote this, I wondered if I was a terrible minister for thinking these thoughts. Then last night at a party I heard a very similar story from a woman about my age. "I don't want to be nice to people who are voting for policies that hurt me directly," she said. "I don't want to talk to them, I don't want to see them. I'm just so angry and fundamentally don't understand why they vote the way they do."

I wonder if you are experiencing any of this kind of reactivity yourself, or you can relate on some level. In these deeply divided and partisan times, this is a pep talk sermon for those of us struggling to remember how to be in relationship with those with whom we fundamentally disagree.

This first principle of our faith - respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person—turns out to be one of the most difficult to put into practice these days. The Universalist part of our faith is a hopeful history of evolving compassion and wide embrace for the human family-- no exceptions. As Unitarian Universalists who often lean left, we need to be especially mindful in these times that we do not create a political idol of our liberal religion. I always remember the words of my colleague Rev. Rob Hardies of All Souls Washington DC. "How do you know when you have created a god in your own image?" Hardies asked. "When he hates the same people you do."

Here at Neighborhood we understand our relationship with one another to be covenantal, not a creedal. We start with that Universalist understanding of the basic goodness of every person. Saying we are in covenant is a way of making the invisible bonds between us known and to add a dimension of accountability. Covenant is like a golden thread which weaves together the diverse patchwork quilt of community. The thread of covenant which binds us together may seem frayed and fragile, yet, like the spider's web, it is resilient, and will seek to restore the web when strands get damaged. Being in covenant together means that we are accountable to each other, even and especially when we disagree, and disagree we do. Across our covenant, we are still committed to staying in community with one another. We are all a part of the web. Above all, we pledge to treat each other with respect and dignity. Covenant values being in right relationship more than being right.

At our best, our congregation can be a laboratory for practicing the art of relationship fundamental for the democratic process. The foundation of our democracy is based in the earnest engagement of citizens about issues that impact our lives and shape the common good. Parker Palmer is a Quaker educator whose latest book *Healing the Heart of Democracy: the Courage to Create a Politics of the Human Spirit*, talks about the necessity for citizens to commit to a practice of being in relationship with people on a wide spectrum of political belief. He doesn't propose coming to consensus on the issues, but a consensus that democracy requires such dialogue across difference to thrive.

He writes:

Even if we could achieve respectful discourse, I doubt that we could reach widespread agreement on the details of the common good: Americans are deeply divided on issues ranging from supporting public education to financing health care to the role of government itself. We may not be able to agree on the details, but if we believe in our form of government, we must agree on an alternative definition

that makes preserving democracy itself the focus of our concern. We must be able to say, in unison: It is in the common good to hold our political differences and the conflicts they create in a way that does not unravel the civic community on which democracy depends.

Palmer suggests the practice of one on one dialogue centered in storytelling and personal experience. These days, the one on one dialogue is a welcome alternative to the mob mentality of our increasingly uncivil public square. Take the town hall Wednesday night in Venice, where Mayor Eric Garcetti presented his plan for a homeless shelter in a former bus yard on the outskirts of the city. The proposal, part of the Mayor's "A Bridge Home" program which would create temporary housing for 100 adults and 54 youth, with separate bathrooms and showers for both groups. The crowd shouted down the Mayor, chanting "Venice says no." This is an unacceptable way to conduct democracy, and an unacceptable way to treat our society's most vulnerable people.

At their best, elections can be about engaging your neighbors one on one ideas that have policy implications. A few of our members have shared with me about door knocking for candidates down in more conservative Orange County-- what an important practice for us Angelinos!! Door knocking gets out of our cars and our own heads to talk to people. Being invited into someone's intimate space, you get a sense of what matters to them most. Walking the streets does this too. Another one of our members was out yesterday in South LA, talking about the great conversations she was having on stoops, in bodegas and at elote stands to dispel myths about the affordable housing Ballot Proposition 10. I want to share this inspiring post from Molly Navarette:

Before we moved to Commerce I'd been a renter since 1988. When we left San Diego, it was in large part because we needed higher incomes and lower rents. Which don't exist in the same way as ten years ago. We walked with the community group The Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) Action based in South LA. I think precinct walking is part of my spiritual practice. Especially since I get to do it with my husband Anthony Navarette. As union organizers, we get to get paid for engaging strangers, building solidarity, beloved community.

I am inspired by how our members are getting out there in these pre-election weeks to talk with people about the issues at stake in this election. I truly believe that one-on-one conversation is where we have the most opportunity to create change in this election season. When I talk about change, it's the kind of change which happens when we are curious enough about our fellow citizens to engage one another, and to keep our minds and hearts open long enough to actually listen. It is only then when we can see our common humanity, when the golden thread of covenant connecting us truly shines.

Amen.