

“How We Are Welcoming”
by
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The Unitarian Universalist Church
Columbia, Missouri

This morning we celebrate the third anniversary of this church’s certification as a Welcoming Congregation by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. With the leadership of Stephanie Dorman, Dennis Murphy, Carol Snively and Christy Clark Hutton, members and friends of this church undertook an extensive process of study and in-depth searching. Following that process, a congregational meeting was called. A vote was taken to submit to the Association of Congregations a request for certification, which passed with an overwhelming majority. From that moment, my role as minister changed.

Each member may not be aware, but I am not at liberty to publicly announce a stand on behalf of this church. As the Letter of Agreement states;

It is a fundamental principle of the Church that its Minister has every right to express his [or her] personal view in the pulpit or through other established channels of communication, such as the Church Newsletter, letters to the editors of newspapers, radio, television, and other news media, or by personal testimony

It must be understood, however, that [the Minister] speaks personally and not for the Church. Official stands representing the Church may only be made with authorization by the Board of Trustees or by official action of the congregation.

Because this church is a Welcoming Congregation by virtue of the congregational vote, I can publicly speak to Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender issues on behalf of this church, and have done so, and will continue to do so. I’m not suggesting any change to the Letter of Agreement. Being devoted to the principle of congregational polity and the independence of each Unitarian Universalist congregation, I believe the provisions just cited are necessary. One of our fundamental covenants is to honor each other’s views and values. Part of that covenant is for church life to be conducted in accord with democratic principles. No one person can or should speak on behalf of this church: layperson, staff or clergy. In order to honor our diversity, “I statements” are the order, and “We statements” only when democratically authorized. So, in honoring this anniversary, let us be reminded of the sacred duty of each of us to respect each other’s views and values, and to have the courage to speak out on behalf of the church on issues confronting our Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender neighbors.

The “Story for All Ages” this morning tells of the formation of a family of chinstrap penguins. As mentioned in the telling, it is a true story. There are two male penguins that did indeed nurture an unwanted egg through gestation at the Central Park Zoo in New York City. Upon hatching, the hatchling was named by the zoo personnel Tango, a female. Following the hatching, the two males, Roy and Silo, continued to nurture the hatchling into adulthood. The bond between Roy and Silo continued through the nurturing process and beyond. This is not an issue of same sex as it is too often portrayed. It is an issue of relationship of lasting value and duration. And that is primarily the issue with LGBT

circumstances in our society today. With our society's obsession with sex, usually the illicit kind, it is too easy to fall into the trap that same-sex relationships are only about sex. Perhaps we should change the dialog and refer instead to same-gender relationships, just to focus on the relationship rather than the sex.

I'm certain each of you in the past have encountered in some way an LGBT person, either knowingly or unknowingly. My first engagement was with my architect mentor, Bruce Goff. At that time, it was not prudent to come out of the closet. He remained locked in his own identity through all the years I knew him. He was the Chair of the School of Architecture of the College of Engineering at Oklahoma University. Without knowing of his orientation, the President of the University personally invited Goff to the faculty, which raised some tensions within campus politics from the beginning. Goff was achieving international recognition, and President George Cross felt assigning a native of Oklahoma with such credentials was appropriate. There were those on the campus and in the Engineering College who did not share that feeling.

When I attended the School, there were about 350 enrolled students. Fully half were from out of the state of Oklahoma, and even abroad. We were in the School because of Goff's reputation as an outstanding architect and teacher. Some of us had our suspicions that Goff was gay. None of us were ever given any overt sign that he was, other than he was not married. We attributed that to his devotion to his calling to his art, and rightly so. Then, one day, there was an incident that was devastating to all, mostly to Goff.

My spouse worked in the housing office of the University. One of her co-workers was a social friend of the Chief of Police of the city of Norman. She reported to my wife that one night during one of their social engagements, while driving past Goff's residence, the Chief said, "We're going to get that guy one of these days." By way of a coordinated effort on the part of the campus police and police officers of Norman and Oklahoma City, they did indeed "get that guy." A teenager was in trouble with the police in Oklahoma City, and it was decided that for him to have the charges dropped against him, he would have to cooperate, which he did. Under the pretext of asking for some questions about anatomy for art class, he was sent into Goff's campus office. I have no idea what transpired. What I do know is the Norman police arrested Goff on a morals charge. Here we have the classic confusion between that of being gay and that of being a pedophile.

From that moment, all of our dreams of being a part of, and connected to, the most outstanding School of Architecture in the world was dashed. I do not suggest the stature of the School out of any misplaced allegiance. Outstanding national and international architects who visited the School while I was there publicly said so, including Frank Lloyd Wright, the most cantankerous of all. That Goff was gay made no difference to those of us who chose to attend the School. That we may have suspected it was of no matter: it was his integrity, his creativity and his teaching wisdom that held us close to him. He remained my friend for many years after his departure. I seemed to have a geographical connection to him over the years. When I lived in Tulsa, his office was in Bartlesville, sixty miles north. I was able to visit him when he moved to Kansas City. During my second marriage, he lived in Tyler, Texas, the hometown of my spouse, and was with him several times. The last time I saw him was when he lectured at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and I was in Santa Fe. He died a few months later in 1982.

I speak to this not to elevate my stature with a great architect, or to pose as a premier champion of LGBT rights. I offer this as a testimony to the power of relationships. The power of my and other student's relationship was in the trust we had in and with Goff and he had with us. His genius drew us to him, and held us to him even in his most humiliating moments. That such power of relationship can happen between humans regardless of gender, then it is encouraging that we can see examples in nature with the chinstrap penguins. It may come to pass that the current hysteria driving LGBT disenfranchisement will subside as a larger segment of the population begins to understand the power of relationship. This church can be a part of that dialog. We have a ministry in the church known as Interweave. The purpose of that group is stated this way;

Interweave in an organization actively working to end oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It is . . . guided by the U[nitarian] U[niversalist] Principles [and Purposes]. We value and affirm the lives and experiences of Queer people of all ages, races, ethnicities, income levels, and abilities. By providing and supporting leadership, and working in collaboration with other organizations with similar visions, we strive to connect and nurture all Queer individuals, communities, groups, and allies.

It is my hope that no such humiliation as suffered by Bruce Goff shall happen again. It is my hope and trust that this church will stand together as future discriminations and abuses happen in our midst. We are a Welcoming Congregation. Yet, that in its self isn't quite enough. We as a congregation are called to uphold the fundamental principles of inclusiveness and diversity that has been the basis of our Free Church movement. We are called to honor and respect each other's theological and ethical positions. So, too, are we called to honor and respect each other's values in living a life of wholeness. These principles are what will move us into the larger world with hope and reverence. In our recognition of our ministry to LGBT concerns and issues, may we continue our open relationships. May we be the beacon of hope and justice for all who are oppressed. May we honor our covenant with our Interweave ministry.

Amen.