

Etiquette Revisited

September 18, 2016
Rev. Rebecca M. Bryan
First Parish in Brookline

“Tell us about a time when you knowingly hurt a person of another race. Tell us about a time when you knowingly hurt a person of another race.”

I was stunned. Fortunately, I took their question as having good intent and did not perceive it as threatening. AND I was struck silent.

I was meeting with the Regional Sub-Council on Candidacy. This was early in my preparation for ministry and was a required step in the process to becoming an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. (This group does not actually exist anymore as of 2015—we are instead pursuing a more ‘ministry in care’ program. Just to be current.)

I had been warned that this panel could and would ask me about anything. My personal family history, jobs, call to ministry, experience in Unitarian Universalism, etc. And still I was not prepared for the question. “Tell us about a time when you knowingly hurt a person of another race.”

After a pause and deep thought I shared with them about a time when I had made a faulty assumption regarding a family’s class based on the color of their skin.

My daughter had just come home from school in kindergarten and asked if she could have a play date with her new friend. I had met the child and knew that she was Ethiopian. We had never been to their home however. I looked up the address of the family in the school directory and read “27 Applegate Gardens.” I made the erroneous assumption that this was the address of an apartment complex. Yes, this had to do with the sound of the address yet I doubted that I would have made that assumption if the child had been white.

Well, I was wrong. Not only was this not an apartment, this family, who came to be some of our closest friends, lived in a very large home. Very large. One of the parents was a top executive of one of the largest companies in the world.

After sharing this story, I told the committee that although thankfully I never spoke my faulty assumption aloud, I was deeply ashamed for making such an assumption. They listened and we went on to the next question.

When I received my letter of acceptance from the committee they suggested that a “growing edge” for me was more direct experience in multiculturalism/antiracism and anti-oppression. And they were right. Thank God they had the honesty to tell me that.

Thus began a steep learning curve that is continuing right now. One of the many gifts of being here with you in this congregation. A congregation deeply committed to these very issues.

Most recently my journey in this work was greatly blessed through my participation in a week-long training that I attended this summer led by Visions, Inc. Visions, Inc. was founded in 1984 by three black women and one white Jewish man. The organization’s mission is “to equip individuals, organizations, and communities with the tools needed to thrive in a diverse world. To remove structural and cultural barriers that prevent full and equitable participation. To help create environments where differences are recognized, understood, appreciated, and utilized for the benefit of all.”¹

Visions teaches, and I wholeheartedly agree, that change at both the personal and the collective or group level happens, and needs to happen, at three levels—the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. Or as a beloved member of my group this summer said, this kind of change needs to happen *in our head, our hearts, and on the streets.*

Vision’s learning and training model is based on the approach that differences are manifold and include everything from age, to gender identity and expressions, sexual orientation, physical ability, religious beliefs, class, and education and race.

As a participant in their foundational training, they encouraged us to enter into this work with people around an issue, a category or perspective, of difference, that they are open to exploring and understanding differently. Often but not always this is an area of difference where a person either has or is experiencing being a member of the “historically excluded or marginalized” group. Because the first step in making change is awareness and where they are hurting, or feeling the pain of marginalization, there is our awareness.

The fact of the matter is that we are generally more willing to go where it hurts, and where we know the importance of the work. When your child is bullied at school because they learn differently than most of their classmates, those differences matter. As our parents and loved ones age and are having to deal with incredibly complex systems that no doubt involve ageism, our minds, hearts, and hands go to work with those differences. When our child, or we, are gay or transgender, then issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are the differences that pull at our hearts and minds.

Race, according to Visions, is the most difficult difference for people to deal with. We know that to be true. We watch it on the news, are privy to its impact here in Brookline and here in this congregation. That doesn’t mean that we don’t continue our work in anti-racism. On the contrary. It does require us, however, to do this work with an awareness and understanding of its complexity and challenges.

Reading from Visions’ writing about this work, they say, “We believe in doing what’s important, not what’s easy... making the hard conversations possible...overcoming barriers and fears, whether they exist at the personal, interpersonal, cultural, or institutional level... We all must first build awareness of unconscious beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors and then set the stage for a conscious and lasting shift in those behaviors. Working through difference is not about creating guilt and no one should be blamed for not knowing. We (must) remove the stigma of shame and

¹ <http://visions-inc.org/who-we-are/> accessed 9/15/16

blame associated with issues of difference, in order to create room for open and honest communication throughout all stages of the process.”²

These are essential pedagogical, philosophical, and even theological perspectives AND there are tools that can help us along this journey. Out of years of experience with many different groups including universities, public school systems, corporations large and small, nonprofits, faith based organizations, and community activists; Visions offers guidelines for cross-cultural dialogue.

Remembering that cultural identity includes many things and that any difference inherently is cross cultural, these guidelines work in settings where the intention is to create meaningful relationships across differences, to change ourselves, and to work to create a more inclusive and just world.

I brought these guidelines to the Parish Committee at their retreat this summer and asked for their endorsement of our using them here at First Parish in Brookline. They voted unanimously to support this work. A few other groups, including our Transition Team and our staff team, have also discussed these guidelines and voted to use them as guidelines in our work. Our hope is that everyone, all committees and small groups, will also adopt these guidelines and that we will use them as well in our one-on-one conversations.

There are eight guidelines, which Visions hopes that we will use and share broadly with others. It is critical however that these guidelines are used together. Using some of them and not all of them, or only your favorite, is not effective. So we offer them in their totality, honoring their interconnectedness and the importance of each and every guideline.

Our intention is that today’s service serve as a starting point to this work. That there will be many more and ongoing conversations about these guidelines, their impact, and the successes and challenges of living into them.

I want to run through them quickly and reflect briefly on their meaning.

#1 “Try On” As we embrace differences and become curious to understand them, let’s “try on” what folks are suggesting. This is perfect for interim time. We are already doing this with things like the Candles of Peace and ministry themes.

#2 It’s okay to disagree In my experience this one will be a big culture change for Unitarian Universalist congregations, including this one. This is saying that with differences there are times where we will disagree. That’s okay. It’s good.

#3 It is not okay to blame, shame, or attack, self or others. When followed faithfully this is what creates the environment and builds trust that allows growth and change to occur.

² <http://visions-inc.org/who-we-are/our-values/>, accessed summer 2016 and 9/16/16. Words in parentheses have been modified for oral delivery.

#4 Practice “self focus” Meaning don’t be pointing fingers (you know when you do that there are three pointing back at you). Focus on your growth and change, not what others are doing or not doing, or how they need to be acting.

#5, as we talked about in last week’s service, Practice “both/and” thinking.

#6 Notice both process and content. Most of us are more comfortable with one or the other of these; it’s either all about the process and content is sidelined or vice versa.

At the same time, #7 Be aware of intent and impact. The way to find this out is to ask, to share our truths, and to listen to others. When we don’t know how something landed with someone, don’t assume, check it out. If we are hurt or offended, rather than internalizing or attacking the other, share how what was said impacted us.

And last, #8 Confidentiality. We have every right to share our stories and no right to share anyone else’s (without their explicit permission).

These guidelines are printed in your orders of service (on a pretty paper that we thought you might want to keep and hang somewhere you see it regularly). We will also have these printed and hung in each room in the church building.

This work and these guidelines are directly related to how we live into radical hospitality, our ministry theme for this month.

Lonni Collins Pratt in her book “Radical Hospitality” describes hospitality as “activities and desires that inspire individuals and communities to welcome those who are unlike themselves.”

She claims and I believe that our identity as people and communities of faith will be gained, not lost, by living into what it takes to become radically hospitable. Radical, as she uses the term, does not mean extreme or “far out.” Rather the author uses its Latin derivation meaning “root.” Thus we are talking about hospitality as something that is at our core, or that runs deep. Something that gives sustenance to all people involved. Lonni writes, “Real hospitality isn’t about what we do, it’s about who we are.”

Radical hospitality is not about changing or fixing another, it’s about opening ourselves and allowing ourselves to be changed by the other. It’s about living in an AND world, that thrives on differences.

We have examples from our religious forbearers of living with this kind of radical hospitality. In fact, there is a movie airing this Tuesday night. It is a documentary by Ken Burns entitled: “Defying the Nazi’s, the Sharps’ War.” (We’re also showing it here at First Parish Friday night with a potluck—join us!)

The film is the story of a Unitarian minister from Wellesley Hills, the Reverend Waitstill Sharp and his wife, Martha. Rev. Sharp and his wife agreed to go as part of relief effort led by the American Unitarian Association to help refugees in Czechoslovakia who were fleeing from the Nazi regime. The minister and his wife were not the first people that the President of the Unitarian Association had asked to help. In fact, 16 people before them had declined the request.

The decision to leave America and join in the relief effort was not an easy one. The Sharps left their two young children, a boy and girl, ages 8 and 3, at home with their grandparents.

Waitstill and Martha ended up staying and working throughout WWII. Ultimately saving the lives of nearly 2,000 people including politicians, writers, artists, and children.

The Sharps were honored in 2006 in a ceremony in Israel as members of the “Righteous Among the Nations.” People included in this memorial are non-Jews who risked their lives saving Jews during the War. The Sharps are two of only three Americans to receive this honor.

The Sharps grandsons, Artemis and Michael Joukowsky, were the ones who resurrected their grandparents’ story. The Sharps did not receive recognition during their lifetime. Their grandson describes them as humble, ordinary people.

He says this, "The key part about my grandparents wasn't just one big moment. They made thousands of little choices that led up to the story that we now tell. Life is made of righteous moments, not grandiose moments," he says, "making choices where you reflect on how you treat everyone in your life."³ Living, I would say, with radical hospitality.

In closing, learning to communicate effectively across differences—cultural, racial, and otherwise—is essential to being the kind of faithful people that we aspire to be.

When I think of the question I was asked those years ago, about when I knowingly hurt a person of another race, today my answer would be, “With all due respect, it matters when I hurt someone knowingly of course, and I do it daily. More than that however I’m concerned about the time that I most recently hurt a person of a different race, and *didn’t* know that I had done it.” That’s where I want to wake up, that’s where the opportunity for growth lives.

Amen and Blessed Be.

³ Deakin, M. B. (2006, summer). “Righteous among the nations”. *UU World*.