

## **Standing Together** **A Sermon for Association Sunday**

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When I was a child, I sometimes used to get an instant feeling about certain people, some thin filament of connection or familiarity, something in common perhaps, or some attraction of ideas, all very vague, but real. I called it having “a string on” that person. I’d tell my friend Patty, “I’ve got a string on that new girl” and she’d know what I meant. Then as a rising seventh grader, I went off to Rowe Unitarian Camp and got a string on a whole community of people, the ones I loved and the ones I didn’t, the geeks and nerds as well as the cool and beautiful. The Spirit of Rowe was within and throughout the whole camp, and I was connected with every one of them.

Many years later I was doing as a chaplaincy – Clinical Pastoral Education – as part of my ministerial training, I found myself in a small intense learning group as the only Unitarian Universalist with a bunch of devoted Christians. I was the only one who wasn’t shocked when our supervisor said, “It’s a good idea to have a serious atheist in your life.” Made sense to me. And when we were assigned to share our credo in the group, I spoke out of my Rowe experience: My whole theology is one of human connection, I said, and Dr. Stevens nodded and the rest of them said, “Huh?” Since then I have evolved more elements in my theology, and perhaps some more sophisticated language, but it’s still all about human connection to me. We live in one giant cat’s cradle of connecting threads. Spirituality is one of the ways we recognize and honor those threads.

Standing together, it’s what we do. As Unitarian Universalists we are called to get past pigeonholes and categories and to find the string we have on every human being. It’s why we were pleased and humbled to be hosts to Temple Shalom over the years until they outgrew the limitations of renting from us. It’s why other UU congregations have housed gay congregations or Muslim groups. It’s why we strive to be a multi-generational congregation. It’s why we put energy and thought and resources into religious education. It’s why we include “whomever you love” in our welcome. It’s why we are a safe place to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, in whatever order we are supposed to use these days. It’s why we wish we were more multi-racial as a denomination and as a congregation. But racial diversity is one of our failings and frailties. We’ve made some progress, but not a lot.

Before I started seminary, someone told me that I should look out for her friend Marjorie Bowens Wheatley, who would be a Unitarian Universalist in my largely Methodist school. And that first day, as we were crowded in the foyer of the chapel I saw the name tag: Marjorie Bowens Wheatley, and I remembered. So I looked up and there

she was, only I wasn't expecting an African American. It turned out that apart from race and age – Marjorie was ten years younger than I – we were a lot alike. Multiple strings you might say. We were the same Myers Briggs type – INTJ - Introvert, Intuitive, Thinker, and Judger – and the same sun sign – Leo. We both had young adult daughters we were sappy about. At that first chapel service during orientation, I saw the altar set for communion, and turned to Marjorie. How are we going to respond to this?" We had the same uncertainties and scruples. Throughout seminary we often found ourselves finishing each other's sentences. And after graduation when we met up at conferences, we'd fall into this staccato sort of conversation, picking up where we left off, in a kind of abrupt shorthand that anyone else might think was unfriendly, but we both knew we spoke the same INTJ sort of language.

But our paths did part when it was time to get jobs as ministers. I was geographically bound, but the district executive was able to send me to a small part time position only 70 miles from home. But what about Marjorie? She had to earn a living. Fifty years ago, African American men wanting to go to seminary were told outright, "OK, but there are no jobs." Even in my day, congregations were skittish about ministers of a different race. And all the congregations were pretty much white. But at that time – only 15 years ago – if an African American wanted to serve a church as a senior or solo minister, she would pretty much have to create the congregation herself. It hasn't changed a whole lot since then. It was a little easier, a little sooner, for gay ministers. At a party in the 80's, I heard from someone at a party, someone who had been on a search committee ten years earlier. He grumbled about the UUA office: "Everyone they sent us was an alcoholic or a homosexual." I don't believe that was literally true, but I was shocked that he spoke as if those were somehow equivalent. Yet by 1998, the interim who followed me in that tiny congregation in northern Maryland was openly gay, and only one prominent family left the church because of that. Progress, slow and not so steady. . . . Many congregations in search took part in a workshop called "Beyond Categorical Thinking," that helped them expand their ideas of who might be a suitable ministers. And when Marc Fredette was interim here just five years ago, I have heard no rumblings of complaint about his being gay. Indeed, he was given a beautiful handmade stole as a farewell gift – he sent me a picture this week. And yesterday in Washington, thousands of Unitarian Universalists joined UUA President Peter Morales in marching for full federal equality for BGLT people. Not the first such march, and surely not the last, but Unitarian Universalists are an important presence in that struggle.

But how did Marjorie find a job? Folks at the Unitarian Universalist Association knew that she would be one of our most talented ministers, and they didn't want to lose her. So Marjorie was lured to a position at the UUA where she steadily became more influential. Then she and her husband moved to Florida to do interim work – and then several years ago, through the regular search procedure, Marjorie was called to be senior minister at a prominent church in California. An ordinary sort of process, but a triumph, a sign of hope. Alas, between the time of the call and the time she would have begun her ministry there, Marjorie was diagnosed with a rare form of gall bladder cancer, and she died without ever serving that congregation. A loss to all of us.

All this is something, but slow progress by fits and starts is not going to be adequate for the future of our denomination. The culture is changing too fast. We have to catch up and provide leadership for the rest of the country. Just this week, the New York Times featured a fascinating article about Michelle Obama's ancestry. (NYT October 8, 2009) I guess one of the perks of the presidency is that a lot of people do your genealogical research for you. It turns out that her great great grandfather was Dolphus Shields, the son of Melvinia, a teenage enslaved girl and an unknown white man.

While President Obama's biracial background has drawn considerable attention, his wife's pedigree, which includes American Indian strands, highlights the complicated history of racial intermingling sometimes born of violence or coercion, that lingers in the bloodlines of many African-Americans.

That's New York Times understatement for you. "She is representative of how we have evolved and who we are," said Edward Ball. . . . "We are not separate tribes of Latinos and whites and blacks in America," Mr. Ball said. "We've all mingled, and we have done so for generations."

And here's a poetically just twist of history that brings his story home to us:

A co-founder of First Ebenezer Baptist Church and Trinity Baptist church [in Birmingham] which later became active in the civil rights movement, he supervised Sunday schools at both churches, which still exist today. . . .

He was a Director of Religious Education, a colleague to Joy, in a different time and place and religious tradition. Michelle Obama's ancestry, of course, is not so unusual. It's interesting because of who she is today, but it is also emblematic of millions of our fellow citizens – and of our descendants. If Unitarian Universalism is to be viable in the next century, and more important, if it is to be a warm spiritual home for the generations to come who will need a home like ours, if it is to be a challenging and vital voice and force in the world, we need to open our hearts to real diversity.

One way that we can move more intentionally towards that diversity is through the Unitarian Universalist Association's Diversity of Ministry Team. Here's news from the UUA website, as of October 2:

This fall, as new ministries begin throughout the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), two are of particular interest. These ministries share the hope, anticipation, and vision of congregations who have come together to call inspiring professional religious leaders. But these two ministries are distinctive because they blaze a new trail in settling clergy of color in congregations that seek to grow in diversity and spiritual depth, embracing multiculturalism, antiracism, and anti-oppression as part of their intrinsic values and their commitment to Unitarian Universalism (UU).

Since 2006, the Unitarian Universalist Association has had a Diversity of Ministry Team (DOMT), which has worked to develop healthy, sustainable ministries with ministers of color, Latina/o Hispanic, and multiracial clergy. The effort, known informally as the [DOMT initiative](#), has also focused on offering support to seminarians as they follow the path to professional ministry.

UUA President Peter Morales recently said, America's future is a multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic future. Our faith must learn to express itself in new ways. If we are to be a vital religious movement, we must develop a multicultural and multiracial ministry. The work we do today to nurture diversity in our ministry is essential.

Someone at SWUUSI – the district's summer family camp – said to me this summer that she really liked the new Standing on the Side of Love campaign, because she knew what it meant.

Standing on the Side of Love (SSL, pronounced Sizzle) is a public advocacy campaign, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), promoting respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe that no one should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence because of their identities

I'm for that, and I expect that you are also. But my friend this summer said that she supported Sizzle rather than Association Sunday and it's Now is the Time campaign, because she wasn't sure what that was for. Now, two months later, let me say what I should have said then. Association Sunday is one of the ways that we implement Standing on the Side of Love. Through it we support programs to enhance our diversity, we fund lay theological education, we develop social justice curricula.

It's not all up to us. We are not alone in this endeavor, we who may feel like outliers here in Northwest Arkansas. We stand together, with each other and with Unitarian Universalists around the world. Through the UUA we bless the world together. The Diversity of Ministry Team is one of the ways we are cleaning up our own house, so that we can be a beacon to others. We stand together with each other and with oppressed and undervalued people everywhere, whether it is marching on Washington for the rights of BLGT people, or writing our senators about the need for health care for all or whether it is refusing to be drawn into sly racial or religious slurs around the water cooler. By standing together, by making our denomination stronger, we can live our out values now and into the future. So may it be.

Amen, shalom, and blessed be.