

## **“Com-passion:” A Theological Foundation for Intergenerational Worship**

by John Tolley

Posted in *Cooking Together: Recipes for Immigration Justice Work*

November 30, 2011



Why do we do justice work? Theologically speaking, we are guided by ancient tradition and covenants that teach us to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” A more contemporary articulation for Unitarian Universalists would be that to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person means advocating for all human expression whatever the situation. Such advocacy is how we honor that worth. But when we’re crossing cultural boundaries in doing our advocacy work, we need to be mindful that our efforts do not patronize nor our expressions become misappropriation.

In my own anti-racism and anti-oppression work over the last decades, and especially in the early days of that awakening in me, I came to appreciate a way to understand “compassion” more fully. I am thinking here about the Latin roots of the word compassion: the prefix *com* meaning *with*, and *passion* meaning *to feel*. “Com-passion” equals “feeling with.” I’m not writing about some action where one in privilege reaches down to alleviate the pain of someone less fortunate. That is a vapid, empty devaluation of the word itself. But I am talking about discovering ways to identify with those whose positions we advocate, so that their concerns and their struggles become ours in the most intimate, intuitive ways.

For me, as a young man, I struggled to create a career in the church and honor my gay identity at the same time. The prejudice and dismissal which I experienced gave me a way to begin to understand the prejudice and dismissal others had felt for whom I was attempting to be an ally. My learning style and perceptual thinking patterns are such that language is slow for me to create. I learn best by what I see and how I feel. Only then can I put words to my discoveries. So that initial “feeling with, com-passion,” gave me the portal through which I could better understand the plight of brothers and sisters different from me in any number of ways. Never were our experiences the same nor would I ever equate my fears and pain with theirs, but “feeling with” allowed me to enter the conversation and the struggle in ways more genuine than simple rhetoric would ever allow for me.

So in my years as a religious educator, first in parishes and later at Meadville Lombard Theological School, I was often challenged to create intergenerational worship that would inspire those who participated to want and wish for a better world through acts of justice and advocacy. My training and experience was primarily in the arena of religious arts and aesthetics, so that in my designs the visual and kinesthetic elements of worship were

often enhanced over the auditory word. I discovered that this intuitive response on my part actually helped create meaningful services that often spoke across generations and learning styles in ways that our traditional reformed worship paradigms with an emphasis on the spoken word did not.

In the words of my colleague at Meadville Lombard, Dr. Mark Hicks, Angus MacLean Professor of Religious Education, every interchange we have with another person is a cross-cultural interchange. We are more aware of crossing cultural boundaries when we speak with people from different countries, different ethnic backgrounds or different gender identities. But as Mark explains, every human being is a world of his or her own and our goal as justice makers is to enter that world with a sense of curiosity and appreciation. Curiosity and appreciation can help save us from patronization and/or misappropriation. Consequently, I believe as religious professionals our goal is to address curiosity and build appreciation for those whom we would honor and for whom we would seek justice through worship which inspires advocacy.

So how can we create worship based on this theological foundation, through a desire to “feel with” and engender a sense of appreciation and curiosity all at the same time? I would encourage everyone to go read again Plaza Fiesta, see below. In that entry, Pat Kahn, Children and Families Program Director for the UUA, writes about an immersion experience created by Laura Murvartian, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta. Laura first told her own story and then led the study group through exercises that engaged all the senses – taste and smell, visuals and movement. When the whole self is engaged in this way, lessons are communicated more fully and often hearts are changed more radically. So here are some bullet-point guidelines that I have discovered in my work and that Laura’s Plaza Fiesta illustrated so well:

- Deliver the spoken didactic in short offerings to parallel the shorter attention spans of children, not to mention over-scheduled adults! Break up “sermonettes” with music, with responsive readings or songs, dance or movement.
- Use story liberally. The words, “let me tell you a story” trip an attention switch for people of all ages and when a story of either fact or fiction comes early in a service, it gives the congregation a common reference point on which to build a worship theme.
- Build appreciation and curiosity with the use of song, food, pieces of art or banners that stimulate the visual and pique interest.
- Invite intergenerational families to execute a portion of the liturgy; light the chalice as a family unit or take up the offering together.
- Within the context of the service, invite several voices to participate. For even in an auditory experience we “tune in” more strongly when we hear a vocal change.
- Include small, dramatic vignettes which you can build from improvisation so that they precisely illustrate a sermon theme. A two-minute drama can often carry more information than a twenty-minute sermon.

In truth, the creation of such an integrated service demands more time from a minister or education director than the worship which is written in the study. But the inclusion of

several voices and multiple talents in the end will help build that appreciation, curiosity and empathy that is critical to authentic justice work. We remember that we do it to honor the inherent worth of those for whom we would be allies and because we “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

\*For more information on perceptual thinking patterns and learning styles, check out Dawna Markova’s book, *The Open Mind*.



Rev. John Tolley is an Affiliated Faculty member at Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of the co-teachers for the Congregational Studies Signature Course and Arts and Aesthetics. He served congregations for twenty-two years in Indiana, Tennessee, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

### **Modeling Multigenerational Learning and Service**

Posted in Education, Reflection, Your Recipes on November 16th, 2011

The UUA Mid-South District’s Annual Healthy Congregations Conference focused on Immigration as a Moral Issue.

This multigenerational conference, presented on October 8, 2011 had a number of tracks, including political, congregational, and social media responses. The multigenerational faith development track included reflection, an immersion experience field trip and an introduction to a long-term social justice project. For a project, the District has planned a mobile library of bilingual children’s books to be located near an indoor playground. Pat Kahn reports on the multigenerational track written for the Mid-South Faith Development Council.



### **Plaza Fiesta!**

As part of the Mid-South District Healthy Congregations Conference hosted by Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta on Saturday October 8th, 14 people (5 children ages 6-9, 1 infant, and 8 adults) participated in a multigenerational workshop and field trip. In the morning session, all ages heard the keynote address by Jerry Gonzalez, Executive Director of GALEO, followed by a workshop during which UUCA member Laura

Murvartian (helped by her children Claudia and Nicolas Murvartian-Rhim) shared her own immigration story.

We listened to a recording of Laura on NPR's StoryCorps and looked at pictures from Mundo Hispanico, a local newspaper, which featured Laura in September for Hispanic Heritage month. Laura's father was an undocumented worker, who was in the US for a year before Laura and her mother and sisters joined him. They came into the country on a tourist visa (to Disneyland) and never returned to Mexico City. They moved to a small town in Minnesota, and although they were "different" from everyone else, they felt very welcomed by the community. In those days, there were no ESL classes, so Laura and her sisters were sent to a speech pathologist (Laura explained this is probably why she does not have much of an accent). Her family lived in a trailer park and Laura worked alongside her mother and her father in a chicken-processing plant and in the bean fields weeding. When Laura wrote an essay for college about her experiences growing up, a professor wrote "not believable Laura; children do not work in the US." Laura was the first in her extended family (she has 33 first cousins) to graduate from college.

Laura then shared pictures of what to look for on our "treasure hunt"—things from popular culture, traditions, religious items, food and candy and off we went! We had lunch first (the children enjoyed the playground while the adults ordered lunch), then divided into multigenerational teams for the treasure hunt. We came back to Food Court and enjoyed dessert (churros) as we talked about what we saw. The children enjoyed the playground for a while longer while Laura showed us the space for the library and talked about the [mobile library] project. After returning to UUCA, we talked about our experiences together, citing favorite things (treasure hunt) and new foods tried (horchata, a rice drink).

As we thought back to the key note address by Jerry Gonzalez that we had all heard in the morning, the children most remembered the story of judge's son at a family gathering who was playing basketball with his cousins and speaking Spanish, when 2 kids (12 and 13 years old) came up and slapped him and said "this is America—speak English." Or the teacher who referred to a Latino child as a "beaner" and said she didn't know that the term was offensive. Or the children who are afraid to go to school in case their parents are gone when they get home. These things are not fair!

So what are some of the things we can do? Go to marches, carry signs, say "this is not right" when something is unfair, be nice to others, help new children by showing them around and helping them make friends, and most of all, SMILE.

Children were asked, "is it better to follow rules (laws) or to be fair?" Their first response was "follow the rules." But what if the rule is a bad rule? "Being fair is better than following a bad rule. We should fix the bad rule!"

We learned to say many words in Spanish, but the two most important are "hola" and "gracias." When you know how to say hello and thank you, you can make friends anywhere!

For more information about the Immigration as a Moral Issue Healthy Congregations Conference, or about the work of the Mid-South District on this issue, contact Rev. Fred L. Hammond, Acting District Program Consultant. Read about some of his work on the Interfaith Immigration Coalition blog and on the Standing on the Side of Love blog.

How is your congregation, cluster, or district exploring immigration issues in your area? What learning experiences and justice-making projects are your children and youth involved in? Share your stories by contacting the editor.



Pat Kahn, former chair of the Lifespan Faith Development Council in Mid-South District, is Children and Families Program Director at the UUA.