

Semblance of Equality

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Nearly twenty years ago I was traveling by car from Boston, Massachusetts to Orlando, Florida on a road trip to Disney World. I remember saying I'd rather be shot than go to Disney World, but there I was. On my way. I was joined by Richard, my grandmother and our nine-year-old son Antonio. You might imagine I have plenty of stories to tell about a road trip to Florida with a nine and eighty-year-old in tow. We had been driving all day and decided we would stop for the evening in South Carolina. We had enjoyed staying in cabins on campgrounds down the east coast. I'm more of a Hilton than a campground person but the cabins had been adequate. We had called ahead from the road and booked a cabin in South Carolina. We offered our VISA over the phone so we could arrive that evening and simply settle in. The cabin owner was more than happy to leave the door open for us as we would arrive late. We eventually made our way to the campground and drove around and around and around and around the narrow dusty roads looking for our cabin. It turned out that we had driven by the cabin several times. It wasn't that we didn't have a good sense of direction. It was because the cabin we had rented wasn't a cabin at all. It was a pop up camper. Imagine our surprise and my disgust. Imagine helping an unsteady eighty-year-old woman into this pop up camper using the wobbly cinder block placed in front of the door as a step. Imagine all of us climbing up and in and not being able to turn around or move because there wasn't any room to move. Two of us needed to exit while the other two transformed the couch and the dining table into beds. Once two were in bed the other two could reenter and take their places. Of course, Richard and I took the bunk very close to the ceiling. But we didn't stay there. You see later that evening my grandmother got our attention. She had been sleeping on the dining room table slash bed below our bunk. As she was lying there she could see and feel our bunk creating a bow, collapsing under the weight of two adults. The bunk was beginning to bow and she could tell being crushed was imminent. So, two of us exited the pop up camper to allow for bed reassignments. We put my son in the bunk to solve the problem and then two of us reentered and took the couch. All was well until the wind picked up and we could feel the gentle sway of our "cabin" in the breeze. The back and forth motion as our "cabin" was on wheels. The full bath that we were promised was about half a mile down the road. Needless to say we were duped. We had been promised, been assured of, a quaint cabin in the South Carolina forest with comfort, rest, and a full bath. Sure you might call it a cabin, it was in the forest, and there was a full bath available. We were promised and offered something that was misleading and in the end couldn't be delivered.

I tell you this story because equality in our country seems to bear a likeness to the accommodations I've described. We are promised equality but in the end, are misled and true, or full, equality isn't delivered. The bed of equality bows, is uncomfortable and inadequate. Let's think about this dilemma considering the work of Ronald Heifetz. Ronald Heifetz is a Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and founder of the Center for Public Leadership. I've studied his work related to leadership and call on it regularly in my ministry. Recognized for his seminal work on both the practice and teaching of leadership, his research focuses on building the adaptive capacity of societies and organizations.

Adaptive capacity is the capacity of a system to adapt if the environment where the system exists is changing. He teaches an approach that allows us to identify adaptive and technical responses to problems moving us toward adaptive approaches. In "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Heifetz defines "adaptive leadership" as the practice of mobilizing people to not only survive difficult challenges but thrive. "Thriving" in this sense means growing, improving, capitalizing on the change. According to Heifetz "to lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear- their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking- with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility. So, in this instance the challenge is the semblance of equality. A situation where we are led to feel and believe we will receive and experience equality, but never quite reap the benefits and protections of true equality. The technical response to the challenge of the semblance of equality is legislation and policy making equality the rule. The adaptive response to the challenge of semblance of equality is to see the policy and legislation as a good first step but going deeper and working to change habits, behaviors, values, and beliefs making equality a way of life. You see both the technical and adaptive responses are sometimes necessary for true change to happen.

Let's apply this focus on adaptive and technical challenges and responses to issues of equality for the LGBT community, women, and minorities in our country. Same sex marriage equality has arrived in our nation. This is a technical response to and adaptive challenge. By no means am I suggesting that legislation and progress made by the courts shouldn't be counted and celebrated. But this technical response gives the semblance of equality. When same sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts it was a huge step toward equality for the LGBT community. But after the press conferences, the celebrations, and marriage licenses were issued we soon realized that the legalization of marriage was a semblance of equality. I married my husband shortly after it was legal to do so in Massachusetts. There were protesters outside the church that afternoon. Two of them from my Unitarian congregation. And at the same time my car with my children riding in the back seat was followed and chased and our safety was threatened because I was gay. We were harassed, called names, denied privileges that others enjoy, and friends were being victimized and killed. Yes, there was progress but not true equality. And there still isn't. The adaptive challenge of true equality for the LGBT community requires an adaptive response. Not only do we require legislation to protect our rights. Equality comes when we adapt and change our values, our beliefs, our understandings and adapt. change. The technical response makes us feel like we have arrived but we soon discover we haven't.

The same is for women in our country. Let me read to you this outrageous quote: "Educated, modern, intelligent and liberated women are the pillars on which a society stands. Today, women in America have the same rights as men. They work, live, vote, have all the legal, social, and financial rights just as men. But this¹ was not always the case. Let's trace their history from the colonial times to the present." End quote. Yes, let's trace that history. This quote makes my point perfectly. Women have been handed equality throughout history but this equality is semblance of equality. Women have been afforded rights but this doesn't mean they have been afforded the opportunity to exercise or benefit from these rights. The person quoted believes that women are fully equal because of the technical response of legislation and policy that tell us they are equal. Yet they still struggle with sexism at work, are paid less than men, are raped and abused. The adaptive response to this adaptive challenge would be to place equal value on

women and men. True equality can only come when we change our attitudes, beliefs and values about women. When we adapt...change.

Take for example for minorities in our country. We are so sure that minorities have achieved equality that the Supreme Court upheld the law by a vote of 6 to 2, concluding that the state's voters have a right to decide whether or not affirmative action should be allowed. Why should it be allowed? Minorities are enjoying their equality. This might be the most bitter semblance of equality. Minorities have all kinds of protections on the books that act as the technical response to an adaptive challenge. Despite these protections racism is alive and well in our country. People of color continue to receive some of the same treatment they received in the Jim Crow South and are still being killed in the streets simply because they are people of color. Schools identifying themselves as private are moving the white kids out of public schools creating a segregated education system. Students that are not white receive far more severe consequences in our schools and in our courts than their white peers. Right here in our own county. Look no further than this morning's news. Violence in the name of racism has devastated a town in Virginia and the American psyche. What we've watched unfolding in Charlottesville, with hundreds of white people bearing torches and chanting about the value of white lives and shouting slurs, is not a "far Right" protest. When you move that far right, past humanity, past decency, past goodness—you're something else. The writer and minister John Pavlovitz writes, "You're not a supremacist, you're not a nationalist, and you're not alt-Right."

This is racism.

This is domestic terrorism.

This is religious extremism.

This is bigotry.

It is blind hatred of the most vile kind.

It doesn't represent America.

It doesn't represent Jesus.

It doesn't speak for the majority of white Americans.

It's a cancerous, terrible, putrid sickness that represents the absolute worst of who we are." Friends, minorities have not achieved equality. And they won't not until we apply an adaptive solution by changing our attitudes, beliefs, and values about minorities. When we adapt...change.

In an interview with radio host David Barsamian, Noam Chomsky tells us that "Power systems do not give gifts willingly." In this case the gift of equality. He says, "Occasionally in history you will find a benevolent dictator or a slave owner who decides to free his slaves, but these are a statistical anomaly. Those with power will typically try to sustain and expand their power." He says, "It's only popular activism that compels change." In the same interview Chomsky tells us "Anything that might benefit the general population has to be cut, because the goal of society must be to further enrich and empower the rich and powerful."

This is where we as Unitarian Universalists come in. We are the likely candidates to compel change, adaptive change. Change that exposes the adaptive challenge and works toward an adaptive solution by building new and sustainable ways to move beyond the semblance of equality and teach, practice, and insist on true equality. And perhaps most importantly we dedicate ourselves to continuing to learn. My ministry continually focuses on reeducating myself and others in realizing that there is still work to be done. We have not arrived. In fact, I wrote this sermon in response to a comment made to me a few weeks ago. I was talking with a white minister and he tried to convince me how far we have come in race relations. That bothered me. There remain times when the words coming from our pulpits are insensitive and offensive because we have forgotten we are reaching out to all—not many or a few. There are circumstances where community sometimes means “some” and not “all” because we create roadblocks to full participation in the life of our communities. There are times when some feel less than because institutional racism, generational poverty and the like are perpetuated. If we are serious about celebrating diversity, inclusiveness, full participation, true equality, we must relentlessly remind ourselves that we have much to learn. The work of our faith and tradition are our protest, when combined with the protests of others, can make a difference, can nudge this world closer to more love and more justice, and more compassion. Our protests can be responding and criticizing what we see as crimes against human dignity, or our protests can be in the form of acts to promote what we value. Our work is not done when policy and legislation are formed as equal protections. These are good first steps. The real work and solution is grassroots. Showing our communities the way to deep love. Unitarian and Universalism is the hope and possibility for a broken world.

A colleague of mine has these words framed over his desk: "In those days we finally learned to walk like giants and hold the world in arms grown strong with love. And there may be many things we forget in the days to come, but this will not be one of them."

To me, this is a vision of who we are called to be as people of faith. To walk like giants and hold the world in arms grown strong by love. So, let's get on with it. There are gay and lesbian sisters and brothers who live right here, who deal with contempt and hatred and fear every day. There are women, our sisters, who are at risk and in danger. There are our brothers and sisters of color who after all this time remain bound. There is a lovely and troubled world crying out for more and more love. Let's get on with it. We who believe in freedom will not rest until it comes.

May it be so.