

Chalice Lighting

We Meet on Holy Ground

Richard S. Gilbert

We meet on holy ground,
Brought into being as life encounters life,
As personal histories merge into the communal story,
As we take on the pride and pain of our companions,
As separate selves become community.

How desperate is our need for one another:
Our silent beckoning to our neighbors,
Our invitations to share life and death together,
Our welcome into the lives of those we meet,
And their welcome into our own.

May our souls capture this treasured time.
May our spirits celebrate our meeting
In this time and in this space,
For we meet on holy ground.

Sermon

It was August 2020, and I was not excited to move back to Boston. As I drove across the country, I was filled with trepidation about arriving in a new city, trepidation about traveling, trepidation about, well, nearly everything, given the situation. It was a terrifying time to uproot, to lose a sense of centeredness.

The first day we arrived at our new home following the road trip, we pulled into the driveway and sat in the car, taking deep breaths. We were relieved that the drive was over, but not sure about the transition ahead. The city felt big, and also empty. Everyone was ensconced in their homes, staying safe, sheltering in place. How were we supposed to connect, when this was the reality?

The very next morning, we were sitting on our ancient brick front steps, taking a break from unloading the car. We had our masks off, drinking water together on the hot, humid Boston summer day.

A man stopped while walking past, wearing his face mask, and glared at us. He turned to us and said “you two should be wearing your masks!” We smiled, since he was making a good point. We responded that we are roommates, so we were just taking a short break. He then said “new roommates should be quarantined from each other!” We explained that we had been roommates for a year and a half now, and had just driven across the country together to move in here.

He immediately softened. He welcomed us to the neighborhood, and we got to chatting. Nearly forty five minutes later, he went back to his apartment right next door. We were officially neighbors, and Boston already felt more like home.

From that day on, my neighbor John was a fixture of my life in Boston. Roommates came and went, but John was a constant. He checked in on us when it snowed to make sure we were able to position our cars in the driveway exactly correctly to be able to shovel ourselves out, and we introduced our friends to him while we walked past him sitting on his porch

John was the first face of the community that welcomed me to Boston- he grew up in the neighborhood I had moved to, and told us stories about the people who had come and gone, the houses torn down and rebuilt, and his own childhood.

Years after we met, John told me that we were the first neighbors that he ever really spoken with. The neighborhood had changed since he was a kid- he grew up part of a huge Boston Irish Catholic community, and described himself as a part of groups of kids playing in the streets. Now, the houses were either run down or recently renovated to be

sold or rented out at high prices, as Harvard students moved into the neighborhood. I was one of those Harvard students, yet in a time of much fear and division, we managed to choose our mutual need for connection over our obvious differences.

One fall, John, my roommates, and I settled into an overly competitive rhythm of gifting one another baked goods. It all started on Thanksgiving 2020, when we dropped off 3 kinds of pie, and then continued with him giving us a “done with finals” cake in spring 2021. By the fall, there were both store bought and homemade cheesecakes flying between our houses. I gave him a slice of my birthday cake, and he sent over 5 kinds of local cheese.

For the most part, our relationship was easy, neighborly in the stereotypical way. But sometimes, our different beliefs, flaws, or values bumped into one another. This was harder.

When I shared that I was studying to be a minister, John asked if I was going to try to save his soul. No, I said. I’m a Unitarian Universalist: inherently unsure that souls exist, and definitely sure that they don’t need saving. John **shook his head**.

He then stated, with a degree of seriousness unusual for our relationship, that he had seen a demon, and this is how he knew that souls needed saving. I was dumbfounded, standing in my driveway, considering the existence of demons with my chatty and sarcastic neighbor. I think I tried to say something neutral and accepting, but I wasn’t ready to say more, and neither was John.

Last year, we stumbled into a conversation about abortion, and then ran right out of it, knowing we couldn’t change each other’s minds. John was once offended to his core when one of my roommates brought him flowers, considering them overly feminine and condescending. We had a few hard conversations, and he eventually apologized for his reaction.

Sometimes, I would see John on his porch, and knowing that he would want to speak with me for an extended amount of time, I would enter my apartment via the back door.

It was awkward to have these kinds of conversations with one another. Uncomfortable, knowing that there were some times where our own beliefs and norms were not going to come together into a perfect place of mutual understanding and acceptance. We were different, and I wasn’t always comfortable or ready for that difference.

Howard Thurman calls us to love one another not only because we feel guilty for not caring for one another’s needs, but instead because we have the capacity to be in a

relationship together. The big, abstract concept of tolerance, he says, is much easier to enact with someone you don't know than someone with whom you have a personal relationship. It's harder to forgive the faults of a friend than to accept that there are folks with different beliefs to ours.

In hearing about John's spiritual life and his political beliefs it was easier to judge him because of our pre-existing relationship, not in spite of it. How could my kind, generous neighbor doubt that my church was even a real church, that my religion stood on ground as solid as his catholicism?

Thurman says the way to get around this is to make contact with the core of someone, and to love them. He says that this way, we can "look at your goodness, your gifts, your talents, and rejoice without envy or judgement. I can look at your limitations and understand them without condemnation or bitterness." For Thurman, Jesus calls us into this work. For me, our UU values of our interdependent web of life do the same. Being in relationship with my neighbor allowed me to do this- and allowed both of us to grow into a place of understanding of one another's limitations.

I'm challenged by this story- and by putting love at the center. I'm challenged by this call, from Thurman, to "understand limitations without condemnation or bitterness" because I often feel bitter about the ways we misunderstand one another, and the ways power operates to ask the marginalized for eternal patience.

John once asked me about a sign he saw on one of his bike rides. It was a sign for a UU church, and it said "worship every Sunday." He asked me, sincerely, "Rosemary, what are you all worshipping? Didn't you tell me that some of you are atheists?" I smiled, laughed, and allowed myself to be grateful for the question. I told him that we are worshipping the potential for the divine to touch all of our lives- worshipping the miracle of connection, of life, of love. He interrupted. "Oh, so God." "Yes, to some people, and by many names."

This is the kind of genuine curiosity I want to bring because asking these kinds of questions allows us to belong to one another, across division, across misunderstanding and fear. This is how we can pry ourselves off of a path where we allow ourselves to be unmoved by calls to love more deeply. Once we are open to new relationships with neighbors- in diverse communities like Sacramento, this means our neighbors bring new ideas, new stories, new challenges, new ways of being in the world.

We can meet one another in holy curiosity- because as UUs, our charge to welcome one another does not end when we leave this place on Sunday afternoons. This is how we can come to deepen and expand this community- in the questions, in the laughter, in the

awkward exploration, in the openness to a more **expansive** community. Let us work to extend neighborliness to all, including those right next door, who we do not yet know.