

Standing on the Side of Love

By Rita Chamblin

[OPENING SLIDE]

I read a story of a woman who witnessed a painful exchange between a young boy and his uncle. They were on a beach together with the boy's older brother. They had come to swim, and the older child, who was a little worldlier and braver, was ready to jump right in. But the little guy took one look at the far expanse of water, and the waves reaching for him from its seemingly eternal stretch, and was paralyzed by fear. He was not going in there, no matter how much they tried to convince him.

His uncle must have been frustrated that his vision for the day was not working out, and he must have been completely unable to see the little boy's vision of what could happen in that ocean, because he began to yell at the boy. He pressured him, and then mocked him, and called him a baby. Then, he left him on the shore while he and the brother waded in.

The boy stood there, looking crestfallen.

Our witness – the woman who overheard all of this – was horrified by the man's behavior. She had to do something. Once the man was off in the water, she walked over to the boy and kind of leaned down and said the best thing she could think of – the only thing she could think of that might actually help him, rather than making things worse.

In a low voice she said, “I just want you to know that grown-ups aren’t always right.”

She watched as the expression on his face cleared. He didn’t look crestfallen anymore. She had freed him from the burden of believing his uncle’s angry words, and making them a part of himself.

Grown ups aren’t always right. If only we could all internalize this at such a young age, we might be spared a lot of hurt. I think of all the ways in which voices of authority, the biggest, loudest voices, can do harm when they are unchecked by this simple truth, or when people who do understand this truth, take it for granted, and fail to speak up.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a particular obligation to counter hurtful voices with the voice of love, one that has developed over many generations, rooted in our theology.

Our spiritual ancestors were both progressive for their time and belonged to their time. But in the final analysis, what we can say is that they set the course for us to grow into Unitarian Universalism’s potential.

The Unitarians taught us there is one god, one source, one higher power, and because we all come from that same source, we are bound together, with our lives as the only true test of our faith. The Universalists taught us that God loves everyone, so we must take care of each other. We must love our neighbors and we must take in the stranger. Love became their saving message.

And, sometime in your life, maybe before you were even born, or maybe after you had tried some other spiritual paths out first, this Unitarian Universalist path became yours. As I reflect on our seven principles, the first two really ground today's message of love. The inherent worth and dignity of every person; and, Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

[SLIDE TWO]

A little bit of history --

Standing on the Side of Love was introduced at the 2009 UUA General Assembly, our annual meeting of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

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The message "Standing on the Side of Love" was first used in Massachusetts and California during marriage equality battles.

You may remember the shooting which occurred at our UU church in Knoxville, Tennessee. Rev. Sinkford, then president of the UUA, was inspired by the Knoxville community's response of love to the violence they'd experienced.

These events birthed the campaign that would boldly stand with those who are excluded, oppressed or face violence just because of who they are.

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So, what is Standing on the Side of Love?

It's a:

- Public advocacy campaign
- Sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association
- A welcoming multi-faith effort – you'll notice that there's nothing in the logo or materials which limit the message to Unitarian Universalists
- Which stands up to incidents of
 - o Exclusion
 - o Oppression
 - o Or violence
 - Based on people's identities

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Standing on the Side of Love has called for us to join in National Days of Action to publicly witness as shown here. In October of last year, SSL mobilized for full GLBT equality. In February of this year, we were asked to reimagine Valentine's Day. And last month we mobilized for immigration reform.

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If you want to stay informed of SSL's activities and find out how you might take action, you can sign up for emails.

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Follow on Facebook, Twitter, etc.

[SLIDE 8]

Or just check in periodically on the website. I'll be sure to put information about this website in the next newsletter.

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The goals of this campaign are:

1. To raise voices of compassion and love in the public square
In public debates over immigration, LGBT rights, and more, religious people stand on the side of love and call for respect, inclusion, and compassion.
2. To effect change in local communities across the nation. There's work to be done wherever we live.
3. To create a national movement of people committed to Standing on the Side of Love

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Standing on the Side of Love is about raising our voice. It's something you do in public. It defends the worth and dignity of all people through community activism, social networking, and media outreach.

This message resonates. It's a beacon of hope. And, it contributes a critically important and uniquely religious voice to the public dialogue.

This message fights fear and pushes back against homophobia and racism through direct action, education, and prayer.

Standing on the Side of Love partners with congregations, civil rights leaders, community organizers, religious educators, theologians, youth, ministers, and people from across the faith spectrum to maximize our collective voice and have the greatest possible impact on the national

discourse, public policy, common practice, popular belief, and ultimately – quality of life for all of us.

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When I first came to this church, our congregation had just achieved the status of a Welcoming Congregation. I had the opportunity to enjoy the celebration of this achievement, though I hadn't engaged in the hard work to get there. My thoughts at the time were around how warm and strong the congregation felt to me because of its determination to take this action.

For those of you today who weren't here back then, the Welcoming Congregation Program is a completely volunteer program for UU congregations that see a need to become more inclusive towards bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people. Why single out bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people? The Rev. Douglas Morgan Strong probably states it best in the Welcoming Congregation manual: “For centuries, the church has been a leading force against sexual minorities. It is not surprising that gay people are reluctant to reach out to the very institution that oppresses them. Yet, gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people have no less need for warmth, caring, and affirmation than anyone else who calls the liberal church their religious home. In fact, as a subculture in society gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people may need our support more than the general population.”

The Welcoming Congregation Program consists of a series of workshops developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The goal of the workshops is to reduce prejudice by increasing understanding and acceptance among people of different sexual orientations. Our Welcoming

Congregation Committee's first step was to take a survey about our congregation's attitudes and sentiments across a variety of issues including marriage, children, neighbors, etc. They used this to guide the program over the year. LeAnn Weih, the chair of the Welcoming Congregation Committee, said that there really were very few concerns, although many people had questions about transgender issues. Our church's program included a Gay Pride service, a Coming Out poetry and prose reading, an Intersections series on World Religions and Homosexuality, workshops where people were encouraged to work in small groups on a variety of topics, and a Forum with a speaker from the TTU Counseling Center on Transgender identity and issues. Throughout the process the committee incorporated family issues, not just of the GBLT community, but also of those of us who have gay family members, stressing that we need a 'safe' place to be open about our loved ones. It took a full year to complete the process and, ultimately, vote as a congregation on this important milestone.

Becoming a Welcoming Congregation is intended to act as a catalyst to learning more about ourselves and to ending exclusion. Only when we are truly open to the wealth of diversity in our world will the inherent worth and dignity of every person be affirmed with a large voice.

SSL has been very active in states where marriage equality has risen to legislative agendas. We see the covenant of marriage as a sacred trust between two individuals. And, any couple able to forge that bond deserves the legal benefits of marriage as well as the ability to express that sacred trust freely and equally in our society.

[SLIDE 12]

When I was in Minneapolis for General Assembly, we attended Twin Cities Pride. And you can see in this slide that we stand out in the crowd when we witness together in these shirts. We reserved the bandstand and had various UU speakers, including UUA President Rev. Peter Morales, as well as clergy from other faiths. It was our opportunity to publicly witness for marriage equality.

[SLIDE 13]

Comprehensive immigration reform is needed now.

Without comprehensive immigration reform, states like Arizona will begin to take enforcement into their own hands, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Our current system breaks up families, something which we claim to value. Children who are brought across the border with their parents grow up in our country, but without papers. They may be detained and deported as a child, or they can get through high school, but further education is often closed to them. They become adults and start families. Those families may have to watch as their mother or father is taken away for not having papers. They live every day with the threat of detention and deportation. These young people and adults are innocent of wrongdoing, yet they're labeled just the same. They have no path to citizenship, yet they've grown up in America. They often have no ties to their country of origin, yet we would send them back? This tears our nation apart and injects divisiveness into our communities.

Any system which breaks up families is, itself, broken.

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Yet, hospitality is central to spiritual life. Acting otherwise weakens our nation's soul.

Immigration reform and discussions about immigrants in this country are complex discussions, indeed. Some of our country's businesses have sent jobs out of the country for lower wages, creating un and under-employment of workers who had previously earned a living wage. Other businesses have relied on the exploitation of undocumented workers here at home, keeping living wages from both citizens and undocumented immigrants alike.

NAFTA resulted in cheap food, especially corn, being dumped on markets south of the border and multi-national agri-businesses pushing seeds on unwitting farmers who grew crops from which seeds couldn't be saved for future plantings. This led to families being unable to subsist on the land so they headed north to find a way to survive. Migrant farm laborers, who had long been accustomed to moving fluidly across our borders to work in our fields, found that a hardened border prevented their seasonal migration. This forced decisions about where these workers would call home, resulting in many remaining here and bringing their families to join them.

It's not uncommon for people to want to find scapegoats in times of economic contraction. Consequently, inaccurate claims of increased crime and violence and the use of dehumanizing terms like "illegal alien" become loud and commonplace. This fosters an environment where fear, anger and hate can flourish. The push back against undocumented workers doesn't seem to be focused on, for example, the Polish women in Chicago who clean houses for a living. The focus is immigration across the Mexican border. Brown people.

Important, I think, for us to know, is that being an undocumented immigrant is not a criminal offense. It is a civil offense. Crossing the border outside of proper channels is a crime, but many people come through legal channels and overstay their visas. The term “illegal” isn’t meant to be meaningful, it is meant to inspire fear.

We also should look at the question of who benefits? In 2001, the US detained about 95,000 immigrants, compared to the 380,000 detained in 2009. Not all of these are undocumented, and some have committed crimes. But the significant increase is from picking up people without papers. We have 270 immigrant detention centers in which individuals picked up for immigration offenses are held. According to Detention Watch, only 13 percent of these facilities are owned by ICE, which stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the largest investigative agency in the Department of Homeland Security. The majority of detainees, 67 percent, are held in local and county facilities, with 17 percent in contract (for profit) facilities and 3 percent in the Bureau of Prisons. So, local communities, and therefore, local law enforcement may have a financial incentive to enforce immigration law. The largest private immigration detainer is CCA, Corrections Corporation of America, who has more than 65 facilities in 20 states and about half of all immigrants currently detained in private facilities. Immigration detention makes up 40 percent of CCA’s revenues. CCA retains the federal contract to house detainees in Arizona and Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer’s staff has various ties to CCA.

As neighbors, we must offer refuge to weary travelers, not declare that there is no room at the inn.

As people of faith, we are called to stand with the vulnerable and the oppressed.

This is a time of great hope and possibility, yet our communities are threatened by the increased prevalence of acts motivated by fear and hate.

The Standing on the Side of Love campaign elevates compassionate religious voices to influence public attitudes and public policy.

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Just a few weeks ago, on July 29th, SB 1070 went into effect in Arizona. SB 1070 is the anti-immigrant law enacted by the state of Arizona ostensibly to help reduce crime and violence in the state. Demonstrations went forward as planned, even though a federal judge blocked key parts of the law from being implemented; a higher court could reverse the federal judge's decision. UUs were among hundreds of people demonstrating that Thursday. We were acting in concert with local immigrant groups, including Puente, and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network. 83 people were arrested in the demonstrations on Thursday for acts of civil disobedience, 29 of which were UUs. Among those arrested were UUA President Rev. Peter Morales and Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, minister of the UU Congregation of Phoenix. They were among 150 UUs, many of us from out of state, who came to Phoenix for actions in support of immigrant families. Of the more than 100 out of state UUs who participated, over 80% were clergy.

The day started with a two hour interfaith service at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and included Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist,

Episcopal, Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and nondenominational faith group representatives. During the service, Rev. Frederick-Gray noted that her congregation includes families separated by deportations as well as the family of a police officer who was killed by an undocumented immigrant. She received strong applause when she said, “We must not be intimidated, and we must not be silent about where we stand. We must be clear that we stand on the side of love, that we stand on the side of family unity, that we stand for justice. We will not let more families be torn apart.”

The UU World reported that UUs were the most visible religious group in Phoenix, with many of us wearing this bright yellow T-shirt. In this picture, that’s UUA President Rev. Peter Morales addressing the crowd. UUA Moderator Gini Courter said, “On the street we were clearly identifiable as a religious people. We lived our faith in a very public way. People were coming up to us and thanking us for being there.” My own experience mirrors that. I was stopped four or five times by people asking who we were – wearing these T-shirts. After I or one of our clergy explained who we were, the people smiled, cried, offered gratitude, hugged us, reverently touched our hands. They knew they weren’t alone in this struggle.

Rev. David Miller, minister of the UU Fellowship of San Dieguito in Solana Beach, CA wrote in an email, “Finally, as I stood on the street corner watching those who had volunteered to get arrested stake their claim to the street, I heard a young African-American girl turn to her mother and say, ‘What are they doing?’ Her mother replied, ‘Do you remember what I told you about Dr. Martin Luther King? That is what they are doing.’ I broke into tears.”

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There were actually three places where people were arrested. The first was in front of the Federal Building. Three people were arrested there early in the day, and chose that venue specifically so that they'd be arrested by the federal authorities. One of those was a prominent Arizona political figure who has long been an outspoken opponent to Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's actions. Sixty-one people were arrested at the Washington intersection, by city police, for blocking the intersection. And, twenty-two people were arrested by the county for blocking the prisoner intake entrance to the Maricopa County Jail, which is where this picture was taken. UUA President Rev. Peter Morales is the man in the yellow shirt behind the line. Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray is the woman in the middle of the picture. We have video of the action and arrests at the county jail.

[PLAY VIDEO]

Most of the UUs arrested had intended to do civil disobedience. Training was provided the day prior to the action, though we had some people arrested in separate incidents earlier in the week. The leaders, both Puente and UU, which are the ones with whom I'm most familiar, were organized and committed to non-violence. Protestors were supported by legal advisors and handlers who communicated with law enforcement professionals. Police allowed demonstrations to continue for one to two hours before taking action. And, plenty of notice was given to those who had chosen not to be arrested. There were some exceptions. At the county jail, a couple of reporters were unable to step back far enough into the crowd to meet the county's demand to clear the area and were held for hours before being

released. And, a couple of legal support people were inadvertently collared. They were there to advise the protestors as negotiations occurred with law enforcement.

One of the interesting stories to come of the inadvertent arrest of one of the legal support team was from Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray. She said that in the questioning by sheriff's deputies, she was asked of what country she was a citizen. The legal support person, who was brown, was, instead, asked if she was "illegal". Being in the legal profession, and specifically trained in this work, she knew her rights and handled herself well. She said that it is the lack of that knowledge that often gets an otherwise innocent person in trouble. The county deputies, under Sheriff Joe Arpaio, have displayed a zeal to target brown people, and an assumption that brown people are "illegal" until proven citizens.

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We held a vigil Thursday evening for those who were arrested, and were still being held at the county jail. I'll play a video with our vigil in the background, where we sang songs, prayed and spoke out for the release of the protestors. Gini Courter, UUA Moderator, is speaking in the foreground. For those who might not know this, the moderator's chief role is presiding at General Assemblies and at meetings of the Board of Trustees. It is the UUA's highest volunteer position.

[PLAY VIDEO]

Some of the protestors were released in the wee hours of Friday morning. Those included Rev. Peter Morales and Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray. Most of

the rest were released later in the day. The stories, as we greeted the freed prisoners with water and granola bars, were enlightening. Most of the protestors were shaken but not broken by their experiences. Our people had been shuffled around throughout the night, from one cell to another. For the most part, it sounded like the women sang, meditated, prayed and did group sharing exercises. Sheriff Joe Arpaio was interested enough in our protestors to go to their cells in person. He asked one group of women protestors what question they'd like to ask him. They sang and ignored him. He taunted the men in one of the cells about having come so far to be arrested and being late to the issue. One of the men replied that they'd been working on this issue for quite a while, and would continue to do so because as people of faith we need to publicly witness to our commitment to stand on the side of love. Sheriff Joe didn't engage in further conversation after that.

Our actions in Phoenix and the vigils held around the country brought a different perspective to the immigration discussion. Mainstream media now find stories of hard working immigrants, and immigrant kids doing well in school, instead of just scary immigrant stories. We hear about connections between the Arizona governor's staff and a company who makes money from detaining immigrants. Facts become available about the downward trend of crime in Arizona over the last four years. Yes, white faces in the crowd matter. Clerical collars in the crowd matter. All of us, publicly standing on the side of love matter. That's what it takes for the complexity of the issues to be taken seriously.

Rev. Morales says that he sees "how we treat the immigrants among us as one of the great moral issues of our time. The focus . . . is on Arizona. But

the issue is an American issue and even an international issue. As Enrique Morones, the leader of Border Angels, says, “Todos somos Arizona. (We are all Arizona.)”

Rev. Morales also wrote, “Love is a relationship – founded on the realization that we are all connected, that everyone matters, that every single person is precious. True love does not stop at feeling; it cannot stop at feeling. Love acts.”

In an email from Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, she reminds us of the admonitions of Paul Tillich and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that we not separate love from power – for love without power is sentimental and anemic, and power without love is reckless and abusive.

[LAST SLIDE]

Right now, both love and fear are rising up in our nation.

We stand on the side of love.

We want to harness love’s power to stop oppression, exclusion and violence.

We stand on the side of love.

Our local and national leaders have a responsibility to unify and advance our communities not to divide us from our neighbors simply because of who we are.

We stand on the side of love.

People of every faith are called to honor all of creation.

We stand on the side of love.

We are called to love our neighbors and welcome the stranger.

We stand on the side of love.

Today we are joining thousands of others in lifting up love and promising to add our voices to the choir of compassionate, activist people of faith who are speaking up in everyday situations, standing on the side of love.

May it be so.

Resources:

Standing on the Side of Love worship materials and resources

Sermons from Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

UU World article

UUA website

Truthout