



Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot

By Clay Nelson © 12 February 2017

When I was thinking about Sunday service topics in February I thought we might need some time to reflect on this strange new world we find ourselves in since the US presidential inauguration on January 20 and how to respond to it as Unitarians. I looked. There is nothing in the history books that tells us quite what to do. No one alive today has ever seen anything quite like this before, leaving many of us scratching our heads and wondering in the language of the military's phonetic alphabet: Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot?

But the best-laid plans for this Sunday were trumped (in a manner of speaking) a week ago last Thursday when a friend, a Catholic deacon, who has been working with the Indian students, called me. He told me the students had gotten deportation orders that day, and would we consider giving them sanctuary. He had not been able to work through the Catholic hierarchy to arrange it in a Catholic parish yet and they were out of time. That's when he thought of us. He knew of my commitment to radical hospitality, or what I call the Sacrament of Hospitality. I explained that while we didn't have bishops we needed to convince, we were strongly committed to democratic processes, which were not always able to move quickly, but I would at least put it to the congregation through the Management Committee, giving them an opportunity to respond. Many of you may have been here last Sunday when the request was thoroughly (very thoroughly) discussed in an open three-hour Management Committee after church. While I trusted that we would reach a positive consensus (because that is just who we are), I was pleasantly surprised that the Management Committee reached unanimity (which is rare in Unitarian congregations) to give our support to the students and open our building to them. It was an act of radical hospitality and it made me very proud to be your minister.

But it only got better. Monday the students entered our sanctuary. They were anxious, as most of us are when coming into unfamiliar territory, and worried about being sitting ducks for Immigration officers. But there were members of the congregation here to welcome them warmly and to listen to their stories. They were considered family. And members of the congregation took them home to their families at the end of the day to give them a bed. The next day you could see the signs that radical hospitality was building community. People who initially planned to give one day during the week to be here ended up being here every day. For their parts the students were ideal guests and exceedingly grateful. They showed it practically. Each night when they went home with their hosts, the church has never been cleaner. They in turn extended hospitality to the many who came from the community to bring them food and encouragement. The media that came to report their story came to know us by name and clearly expressed their sympathy and support. Even when they didn't need an interview they would call me to see how the students were doing. Through them the spirit of hospitality was extended throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

By yesterday, when we held a rally to support the students we had over 150 people here, many of whom had never been here before and didn't know a Unitarian from a Trinitarian, to ask the government to rescind the deportation order. Afterwards, the Indian and Sikh community brought enough food to give everyone a feast. Jesus, who was no neophyte to feeding large crowds, would have been impressed. It made my heart glad to watch those gathered getting to know each other over a meal. As one person mentioned to me, there was a heart-warming buzz in the room.

While we don't know if we will achieve our goal for justice, although I expect we will know shortly, none of us will be the same after this week. It has been transformational. These events have been woven into our history as a congregation and into our very souls.

I suppose the reason I marvel at this week's events is that I know how difficult radical hospitality is. As human beings we are wired to stay in our comfort zones. There is a reason the phrase "birds of a feather flock together" is a cliché. We are most comfortable with people who look like us, grew up like us, have the same food preferences, like the same music, talk like us, vote like we do, think like us, have experiences to which we can relate. Hospitality demands we move out of our comfort zone, to make an effort to understand and celebrate our differences. Who needs that when we there are plenty of people we can find who we can relate to easily?

Many years ago I did research for my Masters thesis that looked at the attitudes of those who lived in *de facto* segregated situations versus those in integrated situations. It was at the Ohio State University, where entering students were assigned to residence halls regardless of race. So most first-year students were in integrated halls. For their second year they could choose where they wanted to live. As a result there were resident halls that were predominantly African-American and halls that were predominantly white. In the white halls I tested attitudes about blacks in general and vice versa in the black halls. I discovered that the attitudes were overall positive, but not exceedingly so, about the other race. Further questioning found that not having to relate to the other group made it easy to express politically correct attitudes. However, in the integrated halls I didn't find attitudes were politely positive. Both black and white students were either strongly positive or strongly negative. Few, if any, were lukewarm.

Further interviews uncovered that the attitudes were, not surprisingly, shaped by positive and negative experiences with the other race. What was surprising was that the experiences were not all that dissimilar to each other. The difference was in the openness (or otherwise) of the student to understand and welcome the other into their life: their willingness to work through their discomfort in an unfamiliar situation. But sadly, the open students were not the majority.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist best known for his book *Bowling Alone*, explores the growing isolation of Americans. He wanted to find out what happens when diverse groups of people live in the same area, as opposed to a homogeneous group of people living in an area. He found that when people are near people unlike themselves, they tend to "hunker down." Not only do they not interact as much with people who are different from themselves, but they don't interact with their own

group as much: they watch more TV, they have fewer friends, they are less likely to work on community projects. The level of trust and interaction is greatest when people are with others who are most like them. When these results came back, Putnam distrusted what he saw, and so did his colleagues. So he spent years more checking out his data (30,000 people were interviewed)—and yes, he found he was right. Putnam, a dyed-in-the-wool progressive and very pro-diversity, nevertheless concludes, “In the face of diversity, most of us retreat.”

Another study shows that churches that try to bridge social divisions have a tough job. Paul Lichterman, in his book *Elusive Togetherness*, says that churches that attempt to bridge strong social differences mean well, but are most often not successful. He says when churches in his study tried to do outreach, differences in social customs and in styles of relating made it nearly impossible for faith-based efforts to close the gaps.

He said that the single group in his study that did succeed constantly evaluated and reevaluated what they were doing and why they were doing it, in order to understand their own cultural underpinnings and those of others. In other words, they paid close attention to how they were talking, interacting, and engaging on a daily level. They learned to approach others as partners rather than as people they were helping. I think this is exceedingly important. Success, in other words, lies not so much in ideology or in organizational structure, as in the detailed content of our conversations.

So what does this mean for us as a church? We are committed to being a welcoming community. We say we believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of all.” And yet we are human beings, and we have the same challenges that all human beings have. We feel more comfortable when we’re with people we know. When we come to church, we gravitate to people we know. We feel less comfortable when we are with people who have different ideas and interests, different cultural assumptions. Tribalism is strong, and we need look no further than our own congregation. Yes, we overcame it this week (and good on us), but what about next week?

My hope is that our takeaway from this week is that the gift radical hospitality offers us something meaningful and life giving. It is worth moving outside our comfort zone. Most congregations have debated this but not tried it. Our experience this week can be an encouraging word to them, but more importantly it calls us to say whiskey, tango, foxtrot and keep at it.