



Popping the Bubble

Clay Nelson © 2 September 2018

I read recently that 96% of Unitarians in America now identify as Democrats. I'm not sure how reliable that figure is, but it sounds about right, especially after the last election. Those who were repelled by candidate Trump were stunned that he was now their president. They sought to make sense of this outcome and to find comfort with others wanting to live in denial of the reality of a President Trump. So, attendance at Unitarian churches shot up in the aftermath of the election. I blame their shock on their Facebook newsfeeds. All their friends agreed with them that Americans would never elect him. The people who supported him weren't numbered amongst their Facebook friends. How could they take seriously anyone who watched Fox News and quoted Sean Hannity?

My daughter, who lives in an enclave of wealthy, predominantly white, but politically progressive folk on an island off Seattle put it best, "I had no idea I was living in such a bubble." The truth is most of us don't know we live in a bubble. No matter where we are on the political spectrum; no matter what our spiritual beliefs; no matter what our socio-economic status; no matter our gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, race, age, education, vocation, abilities, or hobbies, we live in a bubble. While we don't necessarily recognise that we do, if the folks we associate with enjoy the same activities, speak the same language, share the same biases, look like us, vote like us, pray or don't pray like us, play like us, we live in a bubble.

Generally, even if we have an epiphany and become aware of our bubble, that doesn't trouble us. It's a comfortable place to be, if only because those around us reaffirm how we like to see ourselves. They validate our desired self-image. Neither do we have to explain our worldview to those who reside in our bubble. They tend to share it, more or less. Nor do we have to listen to each other. We speak in a code to each other that does not have to be deciphered. What's not to like about living in a bubble?

That question can only be answered if the bubble bursts. I had such an experience about five years ago. I would have told you then that I didn't live in a bubble. I worked at the most progressive and inclusive Anglican church in New Zealand. We prided ourselves on welcoming everyone, just as this congregation does. While Anglican discipline states that only the baptised can receive communion, we invited those of any faith or no faith to come forward to receive. Being next door to the City Mission our doors were open every weekday to their clients to come out of the rain or cold. At night they made their beds in our entryways. We were advocates for those on society's margins, in particular the rainbow community.

While there I began to focus on how to break the cycle of poverty and income inequality. That led to my involvement in the Living Wage Movement. I was invited to attend a week-long training for potential leaders of the movement. Those attending were from the faith community, unions and NGOs. To my surprise I knew no one there. You see, even those from the faith community were not from mine and most came from South Auckland. They served Maori and Pasifika congregations. We lived in different bubbles. My congregation had a sprinkle of non-Pakeha members, but most were white, middle class and privileged. Their congregations were often the working poor the Living Wage Movement was hoping to support.

The differences were even greater with the union leaders. Most were unchurched and not without their suspicions of those from the faith community. Besides they spoke in alphabet soup. They spoke of the CTU, EPMU, SFWU, NSU, PSA, ILO and IAF, for none of which did I have a frame of reference.

The NGO leaders lived in a very different world from churches, struggling to compete for government grants to underwrite their mission. Churches might be a funding source, but that was the extent of their connection.

In this milieu, I was definitely outside my comfort zone. The bubble had popped. It left me vulnerable, but open to a new experience. The purpose of the training was to build bridges between these three worlds that they might develop the political leverage to further the movement. When the week came to an end we were given the task to have relational meetings with someone who attended the training with whom we might not necessarily connect. Rachel also attended this training. We made a covenant to meet periodically to build a bridge between our two worlds. I guess it would be fair to say that if this exercise was graded, we passed.

Now, the purpose of these meetings was not to fall in love, but simply to ask random questions of each other about what motivates us, where is our passion, what is our history, what are our challenges at work, and the like. The more we listened the more our bubbles expanded. Rachel, while unchurched, grew interested in progressive theology and began reading my favourite theologians. In return I learned more and more about the mission of unions and how they were evolving as the future of work changes. I even learned how to eat union alphabet soup. I eventually went to work part-time for an arm of the union supporting the Living Wage movement, allowing me to get know Rachel's diverse collection of colleagues who mostly came from worlds outside my experience.

Rachel and I over the years since have continued to have our relational meetings, usually over dinner. Besides sharing our days there are still the random questions that expand our understanding of each other and what matters to us. They keep our bubble from shrinking, and sometimes they even pop it, giving us new perspective and greater knowledge of the world and ourselves.

The Revd Katie Harris argues that it is randomness that is key to popping our bubble. She tells the story of Max Hawkins. Several years back, Max was a programmer at Google living in San Francisco. He was a single, well-educated and unassuming white man. He rode his bike to work each day and had plenty of time and money to spend on the activities he enjoyed.

But even this privileged and seemingly picturesque daily routine had begun to shrink around Max. He realized that he was only becoming closer with the people who existed within his bubble. And the people who existed outside of his bubble — well — he was growing further and further away from them. Max was becoming disenchanted with his daily routine in part because he felt he was becoming removed from his broader community.

Max didn't break out of his personal bubble by changing some small corner of his life. He recognised that changing his existing bubble would only take him into another routine. He wasn't satisfied with that because he wanted to experience life more fully by walking in other people's shoes.

This realisation — that his bubble was shrinking in a bad way, led him to reconsider how he used, of all things, the “local event” feature on Facebook. This feature promotes local events according to your interests. Max decided to capitalize on this feature by creating an app that randomly selected a local event for him to attend. He didn’t just want to ask random questions, he wanted to crash random events. He went to school fundraisers, bake sales, car washes, professional society meetings, social group meet ups, support groups, political rallies, concerts, you name it. Not only did his random crashing open him up to meeting new people, he developed a greater understanding of his community.

Max so appreciated these random experiences he ultimately used his app to randomly choose where to live. He subsequently lived in Vietnam, Germany, India, United Arab Emirates and Slovenia and he continued to use his app in these other countries.

There was only one difficulty with his app. Sometimes, it sent him to events that he found morally reprehensible. Events centred on objectifying women or exploiting people with different abilities. Sometimes, it was a rally supporting views that were in dramatic opposition to his own beliefs.

When faced with the first event of this nature, Max had to literally stop and ask himself, “what is the right thing for me to do here?” Do I attend anyway? Do I try to educate and change people so they see the error of their ways? Do I walk away and skip this event because I’m so opposed to what it represents?

After much thought, Max realised that the purpose of his app wasn’t to randomly sample the parts of his community that he agreed with or liked. It was about walking in other people’s shoes so he could better understand and connect with the people outside of his bubble. The people he normally wouldn’t encounter. So he braced himself, tried to withhold judgment and attended anyway. Rather than try to change the people he encountered, he tried to understand them and get to know them. He set aside his personal bias, asked questions and allowed himself to be vulnerable and open.

Through that work, Max found more compassion for the people he encountered and he grew to understand all the thousands of steps they had taken that led them to that point in their lives. His mind and heart expanded along with his bubble.

I admire Max’s intentionally seeking randomness. It is more my style to let randomness happen, like being invited to the Living Wage training. I had no idea how transformative it would be. I just accepted the opportunity. It is not dissimilar to when I got a call from a Catholic deacon asking if we might be willing to provide sanctuary to Indian students who the government wanted to deport. It was a level of randomness I would not have gone looking for, but once presented required me either to avoid

it or to welcome it. For those among us who welcomed them, housed them, fed them, got to know them, it changed the size of our bubble significantly. It made us aware of the sanctioned abuses of these students, the corruption in the foreign student education industry, the under-resourced NZ Immigration Department's ability to administer visas in a fair and just manner and the political system's failure to rectify the injustice done. Most of us would have gone on blithely unaware of these issues except for that random phone call.

Garrison Keillor once observed that Unitarians not only don't own guns they don't even have friends who know anyone who owns guns. The truth in his witticism is that we like to blow bubbles but we are not good at popping them. That is to our detriment. Whether we are intentional like Max in seeking random events or just open to them like we were to giving sanctuary, we need to pop our bubbles. Yes, we will form new ones, just bigger ones, we hope. Our strength as Unitarians is our openness to many ways of seeing the world. Engagement doesn't mean agreement. It means listening and seeking understanding.