Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Discomfort is our teacher

Clay Nelson © 16 February 2020

For as long as I have been giving sermons I've been guided by the maxim that it is the preacher's job "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

I always thought it came from some saint of the distant past; turns out that it was by Finley Peter Dunne, an Irish humourist who wrote a column for a Chicago newspaper. In 1901 he had this to say about newspapers, not preachers, although they seem to have a number of commonalities:

The newspaper does everything for us. It runs the police force and the banks, commands the militia, controls the legislature, baptises the young, marries the foolish, comforts the afflicted, afflicts the comfortable, buries the dead and roasts them afterward.

It was not until 1944 that the church appropriated the quote to express the business of the church. A local paper in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, quoted the line from a young minister's recent sermon.

I guess the quote resonates because the pain of discomfort is a universal human experience that we universally agree we prefer to avoid. Even Shakespeare challenged our cowardliness: "Feel the pain until it hurts no more." Well, actually he never said it. It is an Internet meme that attributes it to him. I found several websites that did so. However, even the internet can be right occasionally, even when it is wrong.

This month is Pride month in New Zealand. Few things in my life time have caused as much painful discomfort for queer and straight alike. In a world long hostile to their LGBTQI community there has been the discomfort of hiding who they are in the closet or the discomfort of risking condemnation, bullying, arrest, and physical violence for being openly their authentic selves. For those who have taken the risk, Pride is the proper response. For those who haven't, empathy is the proper response. For who of us does not hide some of our authentic selves in darkness.

For those who feel threatened by our differences, Rainbow Pride has made it evident that there is great discomfort. It can be expressed in either cruel discrimination or honest reflection about personal insecurities, biases, and attitudes. Then there are those who choose to live in denial, thinking it an escape from discomfort. They pretend that the most basic aspect of our humanity, our sexual orientation, is either black or white when in truth it is much more complex than that. Complexity be damned. All they have to decide is whether or not to accept society's judgment as to which is right and which is wrong.

For those of us with sufficient grey hair and wrinkles, we have seen in some countries great movement in society's acceptance of different sexual orientations. When I was 12, New Zealand criminalised male homosexuality. When I was 36 it was decriminalised. Twenty years later, a few months before I arrived in New Zealand gay and lesbian couples were

allowed to enter into same-sex civil unions. Eight years after that we became the 15th nation worldwide to permit same-sex marriage, the first of which was held here. Clearly discomfort teaches, but it can take considerable time for the lessons to take hold and all too often they can be easily be forgotten. I only have to look at the US for confirmation.

In the last decade great strides were made regarding the human rights of the Rainbow community, culminating in the Supreme Court's affirmation of the right to same-sex marriage. Something I did not expect to see in my life time.

The last year is more in line with my experience of society's treatment of those who identify as other than straight: Seven black transwomen were murdered in the first six months. The Trump administration announced it will allow federally-funded adoption agencies to discriminate against same-sex couples; a ban on trans people serving in the military went into effect; protections against discriminating against trans people in housing or emergency shelters was removed. Last May, the administration published a proposed rule that would allow health care providers to refuse to treat transgender patients.

That's just in 2019. It isn't a list that includes the Pulse Nightclub massacre, or Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, systematically removing protections for LGBTQIA and disabled children. If you are comfortable with this happening, I'm here to afflict you with some history.

For those of you old enough, I want you to go back to June of 1969. I had just turned 20. It wasn't a time when LGBT folks were out, loud, and proud. There were still laws that criminalised most aspects of LGBTQ lives. Finding a safe and welcoming community was difficult in most places; even in New York, there were significant challenges, but there was a thriving underground club scene, among which was the Stonewall Inn. The Stonewall was a seedy club, lacking a liquor license, run by the Mafia. And, it was a club where the most marginalised, even in the gay community, could gather -- and did.

The way these things worked back then, laws were written so that a club where two same-sex people were dancing together, or where a person in drag was being served alcohol, could be raided, patrons arrested, and the club even shut down. As a result, the club owners paid off the police, and had a system of being alerted in advance to raids, which usually happened early in the evening, so the crowds could party more safely in the later hours. On June 28 of 1969, the Stonewall Inn was raided – which surprised the owner, since the place had been raided only two days before. As patrons were being arrested and hauled out, a butch-identified lesbian, Storme DeLarverie, said her handcuffs were too tight. She was clubbed by an officer, and the crowd, instead of backing off as violence escalated, pressed forward, at first jeering and throwing small items like pennies, but progressing in time to bricks, bottles, and more. The police were unprepared; they called for backup. Rioting broke fully out; the bar itself was set on fire, though it was doused. Protests continued for days. The LGBTQ community, spurred to action by the protests, organized. They developed organizations, strategies, and built new community based on pursuing public change. A year later, on the anniversary of the Stonewall raid that set off the protests, New York saw the Christopher Street Liberation Parade – a parade that brought LGBTQ folk out of the shadows and into the street, to show their pride and commitment to change. This was the genesis of today's Pride parades.

Within Unitarian Universalism, we passed our first General Assembly resolution to work for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi rights in 1970 – one year after Stonewall. In 1969, a UU minister, James Stoll, came out as gay. Unfortunately, he never worked as a minister again. But by 1979, we ordained openly gay men and we have been ordaining openly LGBTQ people ever since.

As Unitarian Universalists, it's embedded in our faith practice that we see the worth and dignity in everyone, and so we have been at the forefront of all these issues. But we are human, too, and full of human failings. We make mistakes large and small. Last year, the *UU World* published an article about transgender people, written by a non-trans woman. It was riddled with basic errors, implying that trans identity was something new, an oddity that non-trans people were just learning to "deal with."

An acquaintance of mine, the Rev. Sean Dennison, who came out as a transman in 1996, wrote recently:

It turns out there was a lot of harmful information in the article. As transgender and nonbinary people began to respond, the list of problems grew and grew. As it did, I began to notice that one deep assumption connected each mistake to the next: the assumption that we are just beginners at all this "trans stuff." And as I heard people respond with, "But it's all so new . . . how can you expect us to get it right?" and "Don't shame people for not knowing better," I remembered when I'd heard it before.

I've heard it when someone asked that others stop relying on words and metaphors that exclude disabled people. I've heard it when white UUs have been asked to practice decentring whiteness and include voices and practices that honour black people, indigenous people, and/or people of colour. I've heard it when discussing the possibility of updating a reading that was written before inclusive language became standard. I've heard it when I ask my mother again, after twenty-two years, to call me by my name and use my correct pronoun. Whenever I or any of my friends and beloveds ask for real change that challenges the norms and traditions of Unitarian Universalist culture, I hear the refrain: "We are new at this! It is too hard! It disrupts everything and makes me uncomfortable!"

As I look out at the world and wonder about Unitarian Universalism's place in it, I am more and more convinced that we must stop excusing ourselves from the world- and life-changing work of justice by claiming that we don't know what to do because we are beginners. There is no excuse for refusing to learn, when there are teachers all around us. The person saying, "Hey, call me by my name and, yes, my pronoun is they," is your teacher. The person saying, "It's not good enough to quote all white men in your sermon," is your teacher. The person saying, "I can't get into your building and, when I do, you ignore me," is your teacher. The person saying, "It's not about your comfort," is your teacher. The teachers and lessons have been here for decades. It's time to learn.

This is why Pride matters for all of us. Because we have to take care of one another. The Rev. Theresa I. Soto, who also just happens to be Sean's spouse,

puts it this way, “All of us need all of us to survive.” Part of being able to take care of one another is to understand the challenges each of us faces. We can’t say, “I don’t care whether or not you’re gay, I like you whatever you are.” To say that is to actually say, “I neither know nor care about the harms you face. I am uninterested in your struggles, and you can’t count on me to stand by you when you face injustice, just for being who you are.” That is not how we take care of one another. We need to understand each other’s experience of the world, take into account the risks we each face, have compassion for the wounds we carry, and stand together when the tides of inequity rise. Celebrate discomfort and learn.