

Draft

LIBERAL RELIGION AND BEING SEATED AT THE WELCOME TABLE

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
November 21, 2010**

Good morning again, everyone, and thank you for being here today. I've been thinking a lot about family these days and in part because of the coming holiday season. I know that many of you plan to spend time with family this week for Thanksgiving and then during the holidays. I will be going to see my aunt and uncle and their daughter and grandson this Thursday for the day. I think it will be the first time I've spent Thanksgiving with my biological family for many years.

Thanksgiving makes me think of dinner and being seated at a table with others. It's really about a welcome table where people of many generations gather together to share food and companionship.

Consider, if you will, the preparations for an extended family and friends Thanksgiving dinner. It is an elaborate undertaking at the best of times. The menu plans, the cooking times, the endless details about shopping and enough glasses can consume days of work.

If you are hosting or visiting a small family as I will be, the potential nightmare of a guest list is largely avoided. Five or six people who are related to each other will sit around the welcoming table with the groaning weight of a free range (in our case) turkey with all the fixings. There will be all ages present from child to grandparent. There will be a matriarch and/or patriarch who gets things started with "**who wants the turkey's tail**" and we go from there. It's pretty straightforward.

But what happens in contemporary American life when families have become extended, hyphenated, elongated, mutated and divided into clans, principalities and a few rebels here and there. How on earth do we plan a feast for such a group of unlikely fellow travelers?

This is why I consulted Miss Manners and read you her reasoning a few minutes ago. Her solution can work for such a complex family arrangement where some people would prefer others stay away or who have lingering resentments. Solution: have a main dinner for all those who see eye to eye and can get along. Then have a secondary dinner for everyone else.

Miss Manners does not address the even more complex problem when deciding how to invite everyone to the welcome table when everyone gets along but there are specialized needs. What if two people are vegan and one

can't stand being in the same room as a roasted turkey? What happens if the dining table is in a room that fits 15 people nicely but has no room for a wheelchair? Suppose one of the invited guests decides to bring a new lover who is Orthodox Jewish or Muslim?

Imagine you are a guest who is coming along with your new beloved and you are sitting there trying to make a good impression, nod at all the right places but you really don't want cranberry sauce because you break out in hives. You can hardly hide it under the table or feed it to a waiting dog.

And let's not even start on how to say the Thanksgiving meal prayer.

Hopefully our Thanksgiving and other holiday meals won't have these kinds of dramatic touches. They will have all the goodies and laughter imaginable with few disagreements, many football games and waistlines that magically remain the same.

As you no doubt have guessed, the symbolism of the welcome table is far more than holiday dinner and tables. The Welcome Table has rich precedence in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Jewish Seder feasts have a table with carefully prepared and laid out food and drink. There is always one seat left empty for Elijah or for the stranger in our midst. Christian tradition has Jesus at the table of the last supper or his frequent meals with the untouchables of Jewish society – prostitutes, shepherds, laborers and others.

More recently the Welcome Table became a symbol in the Civil Rights Movement as a goal where everyone would be seated at the table of common community. The song we will sing in a few minutes is a watered down version of the one sung during the Civil Rights era. Those lyrics say

**I'm gonna get my civil rights,
I'm gonna get my civil rights one of these days,
Hallelujah!**

**I'm gonna get my civil rights,
I'm gonna get my civil rights one of these days.
I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth counter,
I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth counter one of these days,
Hallelujah!**

**I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth counter,
I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth counter one of these days.**

We can understand these histories of the Welcome Table: a place for the stranger, a seat for the dispossessed and room for everyone regardless of their race or ethnic origin.

What about us as Unitarian Universalists in Clemson, South Carolina? We are mostly homogeneous here. We are mostly white, upper middle class,

straight, parents or married or partnered. We mostly live comfortable lives and don't have to worry about our next meal or being harassed in the streets.

How might the metaphor of the Welcome Table apply to us in 2011?

First, every one of us has had to take the seat of the stranger at this table. Every one of us was here for the first time whether today or 40 years ago. We came in not knowing the detailed table manners or the guidelines for asking for nourishment. We wanted to make a good impression and so we probably kept silent and hoped to be fed well. Every one of us has had to be Elijah and it can remind us how important it is to greet and welcome the newcomer.

From what I have seen so far, you do pretty well with those welcoming words and gestures. There's a handy guide called a new visitors packet that you ought to pick up. There's a card that asks about you so we can learn whether theologically you prefer lima beans or less salt in your spiritual diet. We cannot know your spiritual diet until you tell us. That's one reason we have the UU and You class regularly for new folks. I'd also hope we can begin having an informal gathering after church every month here in the sanctuary to meet you. No expectations except to say thank you at the end of the service for your presence.

The Welcome Table can have its awkward moments, though. You might sit there and wonder what acronyms such as UUA, UUFC, BOT, DRE, UUSC and other shorthand terms mean. We're used to them but we sometimes forget that newcomers won't know our shorthand. Just as we wouldn't sit at the Thanksgiving table and say "so, who wants the FRTDS (short for "Free Range Turkey Drum Stick"), we need to use our language in ways that everyone understands.

We are justly proud that our Welcome Table will have people from many religious traditions sitting around it. There are people here who are atheist, agnostic, humanist and spiritual, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Pagan and none of the above. So we try our best not to offend anyone with language or terms that might hurt feelings. What do we do about the God word or Jesus or even the "hallelujah" in the song we'll sing? Do we lip-sync the words that we dislike or do we avoid saying them altogether?

If we take Miss Manners' words to heart that hatred doesn't belong at the Welcome Table, it seems to me that we ought to speak authentically from our heart. The rest will follow. At AA meetings I personally cringe at the religious language that is alien to me. But then I hear what is under the words – the community of seekers who want to be whole, recovered and healed. How are they at their Welcome Table any different from us? The words are far less important than the intention to be nourished together.

Our Welcome Table is said another way here as well. This week we had a consultant come in to meet with the Board and Transition Team about conflict resolution. Yes, we have had conflict here in recent years. It's normal and is part of families, communities and societies. Conflict and disagreement is part of the growing edge of any family or religious community. How we look at it is like Miss Manners suggestions for the holiday feasts. If one solution doesn't work, try another. We don't need to continue wearing "My Life is a Soap Opera" t-shirts any longer.

The consultant reminded us that we alone in South Carolina Unitarian Universalist communities have gone through all the steps including a congregational vote to become a Welcoming Congregation to those who are of varying sexual orientations...gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer. She told us how brave that action was to take and we remain the only congregation in South Carolina to have taken that step.

Are we truly comfortable with that stance? When Vanessa and I were still together and we came here to meet with you in June, we were told of a rumor. The rumor was that the new interim minister was from the West Coast, was 60 years old and single. Was it possible that therefore I was gay based on those known facts?

Both Vanessa and I were quite amused by the rumor but I expect the real response by anybody here would have been **"so what? We are a welcoming congregation and everyone is welcome including at the head of the table to do the blessing."**

I continue to see if there's a way to create a 12-step support group that is especially welcoming for GLBTQ folks and it meet here on a regular basis. That would also be part of the Welcoming Congregation and it would also be a bold statement that all are welcome here as they work out the suffering than can be addiction.

Is there more to do? Of course there is. Our Welcome Table is never large enough for the stranger, the curious, the hungry, the outcast, the seeker.

One of my colleagues at our Baltimore church wrote a beautiful sermon some years ago about the Welcome Table at their church. She spoke of a theology that I think applies to us as well. I conclude with it but would ask us to consider these questions: How ample is our Welcome Table and does it have all that is needed to sustain us and all those who seek us out?

I end with these words from Reverend Phyllis L. Hubbell:

"And this is our theology, our welcome table theology. We are imperfect, and in our weaker moments we sometimes resist those added places. But at our best, our vision is a round table that encircles this sanctuary, a table filled with grits and greens, potato latkes and matzo,

sushi and tofu, Baltimore crabs and Boston baked beans. All are seated, and all have a chance to speak or sign. Thanks are offered in prayer and in silence. Assistance is available for those who need it. An empty seat is always left for the stranger. It is a table where all are worthy, all are welcome.”

Thank you.