

MY JOURNEY FROM HOMOPHOBIA

— Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove — March 23, 2014 —

— Cedars Unitarian Universalists Church — Bainbridge Island and Greater Kitsap County, WA —

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Order of Service **INSERT** (see below sermon) — *Why a Welcoming Congregation Matters to Me*

Order of Service **QUOTE**: *My own parents made no conscious attempt to teach me rigid sex roles, yet both they and I lived in the heterosexual box that was far larger, and more deeply formative, than either they or their children could realize.* —Carter Heyward, Episcopal priest and feminist theologian

SONG — *Everything Possible* (by Fred Small)

Chorus: *You can be anybody you want to be; you can love whomever you will.
You can travel any country where your heart leads, and know I will love you still.
You can live by yourself; you can gather friends around; you can choose one special one.
And the only measure of your words and your deeds
Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.*

SERMON: My Journey From Homophobia — Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove

My movement away from the homophobic box of younger years doesn't feel like a particularly dramatic story, but I appreciate where it's taken me, and maybe the telling can be helpful to others. It *does* have everything to do with Unitarian Universalism and our collective religious path in this direction.

I am thoroughly one of the majority types in our land: a tall, white, hetero, EuroAmerican male. There's been a red carpet of privilege laid out in front of me, which I may have philosophically rejected and avoided in some ways, but it's still there, allowing me a kind of security I now know just isn't part of life for many others.

But with or without a dramatic odyssey, I hope I've become increasingly open to the diversity of possibilities on the gender continuum, affirming them all, even as I sometimes struggle to keep up with the appropriate "best practices," if you will.

Despite major, even stunning advances in acceptance in recent years, our still-dominantly heterosexist culture exhibits plenty of occasions and expressions that demean and deny the humanity of persons under the umbrella initials LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning or Queer). In many places, such harsh behavior is rarely opposed at all, let alone effectively countered by scientific or religious discourses.

But our identity as Unitarian Universalists invests us with an imperative to voice specific as well as implicit objections to expressions of hate and diminishment. We know enough to refute spurious arguments that are often used as tools of exclusion and oppression. We know enough about the nature of true spirituality to refute the idea that *anyone* is expendable, even if we might not personally relate to experiences and identities that are not our own. Today I speak for myself and maybe others like me, but I also honor those of you who know first hand the struggles and challenges of life on other places amid the gender continuum.

Many of us have seized the Unitarian Universalist imperative to actively affirm universal human dignity and worth. Our UU Principles require of us, individually and as a congregation, to work toward a world in which all repression or oppression is ended, a world that affirms the right of all people to self-determination in matters of conscience and identity.

Here at Cedars, with a generally loving welcome of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, it may be difficult to comprehend the poisoned atmosphere of oppression that is inhaled daily by LGBTQ persons in America and elsewhere. But those under that umbrella, who seek some shelter from the rain of abuse, often choke on noxious fumes from other human beings. At times, there may even be a whiff of these fumes at Cedars. A casual or ignorantly inexperienced statement, however innocent, may drive people away from us before we even meet or can get to know them.

These are some of the reasons it is so crucial to renew the Cedars Church commitment to being a Welcoming Congregation, which we last did around 10 years ago. This afternoon we begin a well-established training we call our Welcoming Congregation Renewal, a comprehensive resource to deepen our self-education on LGBT topics. I invite and encourage wide participation in this powerful opportunity, and appreciate the leaders among us who have prepared this workshop.

Let's determine how satisfied or dissatisfied we are with the progress of our congregation, our country, our culture, ourselves. And let's ensure that the children among us—in our families and in our Religious Education classes—are growing up in an atmosphere that will allow them to flourish without either contributing to or experiencing the kind of suicidal self-loathing that has afflicted too many LGBTQ young people of current and previous generations.

There are numerous kinds of oppressions in our culture—probably in most cultures—all of which deserve scrutiny and reform. Throughout the progressive religious history of Unitarian Universalism, this been one of our calling cards: scrutiny and reform. We activate our human reasoning abilities and set about “piercing evil’s new disguises,” as described in one of our hymns [*Singing the Living Tradition* #23, Bring Many Names].

For it is true, evil behavior abides and evolves. It hides anew in contemporary cloaks and it can also be *exposed* anew with growing intention, awareness and conviction. There is, even in the face of continuing harshness, a steady stream of heartening advances that provide great hope, as does the fact that I—a tall, white, hetero, EuroAmerican male—have traveled the distance I have in my own posture. Once classically homophobic, and still with my own continuing near-sightedness, I am now proud to at least be considered an ally of LGBTQ persons.

But don't take my word for this. I was happily surprised by the UU congregation I previously served over in Edmonds, when, near the end of my decade with them, I was publicly presented with a clear glass plaque by one of the leaders of the Welcoming Congregation Committee there. In etched lettering, it declares me “an honorary gay man.” I felt like saying, “I am not worthy!” But I was very honored.

I was raised in the mainstream culture of a New Jersey suburb during the 1950s and 60s. I attended the full scope of one Unitarian church school and was impacted by many of that era's ambitious socio-political campaigns, often led by people from my congregation. None of them, however, addressed the dominant heterosexism that unconsciously pervaded my life and world.

Heterosexism is defined as systemic practices based on (the belief that) heterosexuality is the only acceptable and healthy sexual orientation (adapted from the Welcoming Congregation Handbook). As is true with many biases, I grew up homophobic without really knowing anything about it.

It was not gays, per se, as much as the *possibility* of gayness that got my attention early on. I had virtually zero experience with any gender diversity—at least that I was aware of—but I recall participating in various adolescent schoolyard remarks aimed not just at boys of allegedly dubious maleness, but at *any* boy who could be targeted for *any* reason. A fierce questioning of his sexuality was designed to diminish him, or get a rise out of him, or establish us as better because we were able to dominate.

I understood this sad process because, as a gangly and decidedly un-streetwise kid, I was also regularly targeted myself. Until 6th grade I lived in a pretty rough neighborhood and I tried to learn a lesson many boys still learn: that the best way to avoid being abused was to abuse others first. It was not in my nature, however, and it clashed with the values I was taught in church school, so I was pretty bad at it, and remained mostly on the receiving end of local bullies. But along the way I certainly internalized hostility to “gayness” and fostered a persistent fear of being associated therewith, even well into high school.

My essential education away from this oppressive posturing corresponds in time with the advent of UU General Assembly Resolutions affirming the dignity of gays and lesbians. (The first such declaration came in 1970, a year after I graduated from high school.) In my young adulthood, and primarily in UU camp and conference settings, I heard of and watched a considerably different attitude than I had learned in school. I was unaware of the UU Resolution, *per se*, but the inclusive philosophy it announced was demonstrated by a growing number of people around me, often older mentors.

I was not directly attached to a congregation during most of my young adulthood, so UUism for me *was* camps and conferences, mostly in the Northeast. In these vibrant communities I worked with and became close to people who were—gasp!—gay, lesbian, bisexual and maybe even transgender. Often our relationship was well under way before I discovered that their orientation was different than I had assumed.

At first when this would happen (my “discovery”), I was taken aback, uneasy and hesitant. But being a good homebred UU, I applied my well-taught reasoning ability and concluded that it just wasn’t anything that should change our friendship, or lessen my respect for their work. With plenty of missteps along the way, I gradually came to understand that there were all kinds of gays and lesbians, not unlike the vast variety of the rest of us. Eventually I figured out that *assuming* anyone was heterosexual was a very limiting mistake.

But Reasoning is not Behaving. I could make internal philosophical adjustments fine; it was a more daunting task to change my own deeply conditioned and stereotypical responses. For instance, I may be rarely surprised anymore to learn of another’s different gender identity, but I still find myself assuming most people I meet are heterosexual, even when there may be no real evidence one way or the other.

And actually, it isn’t “one way or the other,” anyway. There is a broad gender continuum, with lots of possible ways for people to be faithfully fully themselves. This realm of realization—that there are more than two genders—has been a large leap for me, and I’m sure I still don’t have it all down. But I’m trying and I feel like I’m growing in the right direction, at least, which is important.

Because I want to be more a part of the solution than the problem. And if the problem is oppression of sexual minorities, part of the solution is for individuals like me to foster an appreciative inclusivity that supports all people to be fully themselves without fear of rejection because of their true identity.

I attribute my movement in this direction to two general activities. One is a willing openness to consider the perspectives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons. I've tried to read about and listen to their stories and their teachings. The courageous people who have stepped up and spoken out have my great respect, not to mention gratitude.

I remember some years back, when I ready to approach the transgender concept. I did some reading, okay, but I didn't want it to be just an academic study. So at our large, annual UU General Assembly gatherings each June, I looked for and attended all the workshops I could find that addressed transgender issues, especially panels that featured testimonials, and this was extremely helpful.

But perhaps my most powerful personal experience was early in 1997, when Barbara and I were on sabbatical and teaching a practicum class about congregational life at Starr King School for (UU) Ministry (my alma mater in Berkeley, CA). Halfway through the course, one of the least effective students in the class, who would often be late and unresponsive, declared that she was now a he and asked the Starr King community for support, which came readily.

We noticed right away that *he* instantly transformed into an A student, essentially going quickly to the head of the class. His participation and comments and written work were suddenly excellent, and we came to understand that the change in gender allowed him to be so much more fully who he was that he could then relax and concentrate better. Without the inner conflict draining her, *he* was able to bring his natural skills to the fore and emerge as a strong, competent minister.

Then we learned another important thing or two during the year we spent as interim senior co-ministers at a large UU congregation in Golden, Colorado, just outside Denver. A male-to-female transsexual was on the search committee that brought us to that congregation and she was very willing to tell about her experiences and struggles.

She saw her role as an educator, a spokesperson who could help others understand that culture and its issues. She was generous and gracious in helping us know a lot more about what life was like for her and her friends—the rejection by family, the difficulty getting *and keeping* decent jobs, the importance of others in the transgender community, and the great sadnesses therein.

Largely because of her impact on us, we decided to host a December holiday party for the small but significant transgender community active at or connected to the church, most of them having no family with whom to celebrate the season. She helped invite folks and we made sure a church board member was also present, since, as interim ministers, we were not going to be around there more

than that year. At one point we asked those in attendance to tell us some of their stories and, for a couple hours amid egg nog and evergreens, our living room throbbled with some very stirring narratives.

But one of their transsexual friends who was also active in the congregation would not come, and we learned she had a very different attitude than the educator from our search committee. This was a woman who happily came to church every Sunday and yet had to struggle to work as a man elsewhere in the city during the week. Each identity was separate and she didn't want to talk about it at all. She just wanted to be related to at church as a woman, which she was. And many, if not most, church-goers had no idea of her dual identities.

So a very important lesson was driven home to me—again. Much as I had already come to know that gay and lesbian people were just as varied in their attitudes and stories as any other set of people, so was there great diversity within the transgender community. And I realized I should question or at least test my assumptions at almost every turn.

This sounds, now, rather elementary: people are different, even in minority groups— *duh!* But until I had some actual relationships, first with gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and then with transsexuals, it was not very real to me. And I've taken some more giant steps since, I think. Once I knew faces and stories and heard first hand about the trials and joys of these diverse and challenging paths, I had to change. I had to add more inclusive behaviors that were coherent with what I now could integrate into my own experience.

I daresay this may be the case with most of us heterosexuals. Relationships make a difference. If one's conditioned homophobia never gets tested by the presence of a real person who is clearly worthy of inherent dignity, well then it's relatively easy to keep it abstract, to stay unaware of complexity, and to hold onto an ideologically hostile or innocently ignorant position.

This, I believe, might account in part for the growing acceptance of sexual minorities in the culture at large. With more and more people out of closets, relationships are REAL and abstract stereotypes fall away, taking with them at least some of the harsh prejudices.

And as much as it was a stretch for me at first, it was also not all that hard, really, and soon sexual diversity around me just became less of an issue, although I still always need to stay alert for my own complicities with systemic oppression that continues to poison the cultural environment for my non-hetero friends and neighbors. The least I can do is be an ally.

Which brings me to the second activity that has moved me along on my journey: being an active

voice for inclusion. When opportunities present themselves, I try my best to weigh in on the side of safety and fairness, although I often still feel pretty weak at it. I think—and hope—I have unlearned the inappropriate conditioning of my childhood and now I see that interrupting evil—obvious or subtle evil—also really matters.

During that one single year Barbara and I ministered in the Denver area, 1998-99, we dealt with *both* the hateful murder of Matthew Shepard in nearby Wyoming in the fall, *and* the Columbine High School shootings in the community right next to us in the spring. Proximity to these horrific events showed us the great need for more voices of both affirmation and challenge—affirmation of those who don't fit into mainstream stereotypes, and the challenge of hateful behaviors that demean and sometimes destroy others.

Can we conquer the all-too-human tendency to deny and dismiss what is different? And can we adjust our cultural institutions to reflect a greater peace among diversity? Countering systemic oppression is even trickier than changing interpersonal prejudice. But what an interesting time we're living in...

You may have hopeful examples of institutional change, which I encourage you to share, because this is how momentum builds for continued evolution. Scot Hedrick, our Cedars treasurer and one of the leaders of the Welcoming Congregation Renewal workshop, told me this story from his time on the Steering Committee of the LGBT Employee Network at a big, multi-national corporation.

He recalled the first transgender employee who joined their committee, and the efforts she made to educate them—a group of gays and lesbians. Well, they discovered they had a lot to learn about the challenges of transgender community members. The moral of the story, he said, was that even those who themselves have had to overcome prejudice and ignorance are not immune from their own biases.

There are lots of political dynamics that need our vocal support, in one way or another, from legislative advocacy of to personally interrupting homophobic expression when it rears its ugly head locally. And there are lots of important opportunities for deepening awareness and strengthening one's voice, such as this afternoon's workshop, with nine more to follow, once a month, on into the fall. When you get a chance, read the insert testimonial from a UU elsewhere about the value of this good program. Take it with you and show it to others.

As an ally, I start with myself and then reach out to share my growing perspective and commitment, as well as my journey. I do this in hope and faith that the momentum will also grow and our world

will change for the better. “Let there be peace and let it begin with me.” What matters most, ultimately, is the love we leave behind. I can’t pretend to be free of heterosexism yet, but I have noticed a freedom from old habits that used to bind up my heart.

We’re bound for a peace that begins with wondrous love—inclusive, transformative, healing love. Come, come, whoever you are, whomever you love.

With friends gathered ‘round, let us spread illumination to show the way on our journeys of hope. Individually and together, we can be anybody we want to be, with our words and our deeds measured well by the love we leave behind when we’re done, personally and institutionally.

Go in peace, my friends. BE peace. Return in allied love.

WHY A WELCOMING CONGREGATION MATTERS TO ME

By an American church member, Unitarian Universalist (via Jaco ten Hove)

When I first came to [this UU Church], the minister said weekly that this was a welcoming congregation. I believed it; I was warmly welcomed. After several weeks I found the poster in the lobby that explained what a Welcoming Congregation really is. As a straight woman, I thought that it was very nice that this church welcomed gay people, and that it would be a good example for my children. As time went by, however, I became more involved in the church and I began to see that my generic-liberal, “I’ve always had gay friends” attitude was not really what a Welcoming community is about.

At [this Church], I met transgender people for the first time. I met committed same-sex couples whose relationships were recognized and honored by everyone, not just by other gay friends. At Church I saw groups of people being politically vocal about gay rights issues, also for the first time. The gay and lesbian people I met at Church were not visitors from another culture, politely pretending that there was no imposition in my heterocentric worldview; they were men and women in a shared culture that required me to get in step or get out of the way. I got my Welcoming Congregation education from the people of Paint Branch, who accepted me in friendship and offered me great patience and kindness as I blundered my way toward understanding.

Being a member of a Welcoming Congregation has changed me. As I have moved on my own spiritual journey and delved into the opportunities that Unitarian Universalism offers me, I have been surrounded by this ethic of inclusion. I have lost my sense of the otherness of people who are not straight, or who are not all “male” or all “female” all the time, inside and out. Our Unitarian Universalist principles have brought me to understand how much it matters that I act as though people matter. I have grown to know that working for justice is part of what feeds my own spirit.

I have also learned that the Welcoming Congregation culture directly benefits me. It first came home to me when my sons, then seven and five years old (in second grade and kindergarten), came

home from school and announced that they would never hug each other again, because the second grade boys had called them “gay.” I talked to them about all the times that guys hug each other: fathers and sons and even friends hug each other. “Some men,” I told them, “love each other the way Dad and I love each other, and they hug, too. Guys who love other guys are called ‘gay.’ The kids at your school don’t understand.” It was a strange, unexpected situation, where my head was in a “how do I deal with this?” panic, while on the outside I was pretending to be Supermom. Later, when I replayed the tape in my head, I realized that I had not said, “You’re not gay!” Somehow I had known that that statement would add power to the implied insult I was trying to defuse. Where could I have learned that, except here at Church?

Recently, I had one of those experiences that divides life into “before” and “after.” My youngest sibling came to me and said, “I am a transgender person.” It wasn’t easy to learn that the person I had always thought was my brother was really my sister, but I didn’t freak out. I thought that what was happening that day at my kitchen table, what had been happening to her for years, what would be happening in the years to come, was not all about me, but really about her. I thought that the best thing I could do right then, was to keep on being a sister. My Paint Branch experience allowed me to filter a lot of the “what about me?” out of my reaction on that vital day, and save it for other times when I could find healthy ways to express my own needs.

My sister began attending [our UU Church], still closeted, and moved into my house. I joined PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and confided in a few close, trusted Church friends. I was afraid of losing my brother, and afraid that when the rest of our family knew, we would come apart at the seams. PFLAG helped me understand that my sister and I could keep all of our shared past. My Church friends held me in their hearts and acknowledged the importance of my fears. About six months after she came out to me, my sister came out to the congregation. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude for the reaction of my church—understanding seasoned with respect, and compassion unspoiled by pity. My sister also came out to our other siblings and our father, and the family is still together.

Justice is not static; it is always on the move. When a group of people are moving toward justice, the rest of us have choices to make. We can get in their way, we can stand to the side, or we can get up and move with them. As a Welcoming Congregation, our Church is a community that has chosen the third option. We have joined hands and walked together in Pride marches, we have advocated for supportive legislation, and we have welcomed Bisexuals, Gays, Lesbians and Transgender people into our family. It is worth asking, though, if we are bringing our newer members with us. Do new members know what a Welcoming Congregation is? Do we help them understand why we have chosen this path? Do our R. E. classes feel safe and welcoming to children with lesbian and gay parents? Do we understand the line between acknowledging diversity and affirming the value of all people?

*Our Welcoming Congregation ought not be static. We have an emerging opportunity to renew our commitment, and I hope we take it. This is of value not only because of the shelter it gives us, but because it is true to our identity as Unitarian Universalists. If we are going to stand on the side of love, we are going to move with the tide of justice. ****