

“Crazy Ones, Misfits, Rebels”
UUCS, Sunday August 7th, 2016
Rev. Anya and Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael

READING –

Today’s service explores a new concept in justice work – the act of decentering. Power is not evenly distributed in American society – we know the powerful are more likely to be White, hetero, educated, male, wealthy, able bodied, etc. Many of us fit into those profiles ... most of us ‘situated’ like our story’s obedient servant - closer to the sources of power and privilege, our social situation fashioning our points of view and our values.

I invite us to consider what it might mean to decenter from our social situation. Dr Amit Bernstein of the University of Haifa, defines decentering as, “The capacity to shift experiential perspective—from within one’s subjective experience onto [the experience of others]—this is fundamental to being human. ... This capacity—known as decentering—plays an important role in mental health. Decentering reflects a common mental phenomenon [aided] by three processes: meta-awareness – or a larger social perspective; disidentification from internal experience – realizing our perspective is not the only valid one; and reduced reactivity to thought content – learning how our thoughts are conditioned by things like race, class, gender, education, etc.”¹

Decentering means we place ourselves closer to the margins, to learn and feel how our world is experienced by those situated in those margins. We situate ourselves away from the center out, to promote cultural awareness, social healing and establish stronger community relations, all the while inviting those from the margins into the center to teach and lead.

Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams taught – “if the Holy Spirit is to speak to us, it is more likely it will speak to us through dissent and through the minority than through the majority who are in control.’ Today our holy practice of social justice welcomes decentering, situating people from the margins into the center to lead us, to grow our empathy and deepen our covenant with them as together we build a more just world with greater accountability.

SERMON – I Rev. Anya

I have a holy envy for the crazy ones, the misfits the rebels. I don’t have any tattoos. I prefer a tight schedule to serendipity. I was never suspended... much to my mother’s chagrin. She actually told me to do something... anything to get myself in trouble!

She, a wise misfit herself, was suspicious of anyone as comfortable as I was, with authority, rules, and good behavior. In grade school she refused to say the pledge of allegiance - I can’t remember what for, but I remember how much holy envy I felt, when

¹ <http://pps.sagepub.com/content/10/5/599.abstract>

I heard the story. She was and is a fighter, comfortable with conflict, driven by her own moral agency.

I can't call myself a misfit, but I do rebel - in my own quiet way. I step, at times, outside of my comfortable place in the center - aligning myself in word or deed with an idea or a movement or a person that de-centers me - that sets me off-balance, righteously.

Our faith tradition moves deliberately, and at times unconsciously, back and forth from these two ways of being. We have toggled. We have aligned ourselves with and around the crazy ones, the misfit ideas, the rebelliously moral - and we have towed the line, hugged the center, and fought with a vehemence to withstand the call to transform.

Edwin Markham, the poet - born and studied Universalist - writes:

“He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In !”

At times I've heard this poem as an affirmation for our tradition. We, grounded in love, widen the circle, and take the heretic in...

But now I hear Markham's words as a plea, that we remember, especially in these extraordinary times, our call to widen the circle, a call that we in our fear, can easily refuse.

We have had more vigils, actions, responses to the world's woes, over the past 12 months than over any other period in our congregation's history. I am cautious when I say that these are extraordinary times because it is so easy to be enthralled by our own special reality... but after deep deliberation, I am convinced that we *are* standing on new ground - *and* that this new ground is not stable - but shaking like a hurricane.

Our two most powerful vigils were testament to this new ground - one surrounding the courthouse in Leesburg, countering anti-muslim rhetoric, and the other in Sterling, mourning the violence in Orlando. I took the lead in organizing both, but I did little more than MC. Our Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Bahai, Buddhist and-so-on brothers and sisters spoke from pulpits “owned” by others.

Why?

We are destabilized, and our center has shifted. We are listening to the voices from the margins. We are drawing the circle wider... not because we are smart, not because we are nice, but because we need to, to survive.

II Rev Scott

We live in special times, rife with change. Our work is to discern what is special, with what potential new life and beauty is our world pregnant? Many are feeling this destabilization; consciousness-raising moral transformation seems like a world

centrifuge, a carnival ride. We need not feel guilty or anxious; it is right and just to notice the sands shifting, and us with them. Times like these we seek new perspective, hoping to put world events into a larger context.

And it seems that what works best in these moments is to draw the circle wider. When we draw our circles wider, we may no longer be in the center of that circle. Too often drawing that wider circle meets resistance. We knew our place in the old order of things. “What might I lose?” we ask. “Do I need to change that much?” “At least I understood the old world.” But change is comin’, folks; we are called to be its champions, even if we must not always be in charge, even when we step aside and follow other leaders. Especially in the arena of racial justice, in this time of growing awareness of racial disparities in many of our systems, from policing to education and employment - we are challenged to decenter ourselves and compose a more racially just nation inside that wider circle, all while perhaps not remaining situated in the driver’s seat.

The term “Decentering” was first coined by Piaget – the famous developmental psychologist. Piaget claims Decentering is a necessary part of developing empathy, happening between ages 7-12 – as children begin to see their actions have consequences on others, imagining themselves in other’s shoes. Decentering means to see and feel the world through another’s eyes and situation; this cannot be accomplished through mere thought alone. Today’s justice work urges decentering, “a deliberate attempt by folks of the dominant culture” – white, straight, educated, able-bodied – “to step from the center toward the margins.”

Most of us fit this description – we are part and parcel of the dominant culture. We are asked to step aside and invite folks from historically marginalized communities to teach, to share – yes, to Lead, so we can see, feel and hear what their life is like on the margins. Thusly we nurture social empathy.

Decentering enables justice work, it builds trust. Indeed it is racist to suggest that a group of folks from the dominant culture can alone devise and control the solutions to problems faced by people of color. This is how white liberals often help in ways that are not helpful. Too many suggest they know what is best, assuming a ‘savior’ posture in their justice work. No justice work is truly just if not connected to a community of accountability – a team of folks from the marginalized groups we hope to witness and advocate for. In this summer of turmoil, this season of confusion and gunfire, we have been called to publicly proclaim our witness to people of color in spite of fear and violence. Together, we will wade into the tumultuous seas of relationship and racial reconciliation, and we will learn those waters will not recede until we move ourselves from where we stand into those waters – but ~ more on that later.

III Rev Anya

We waded in at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. On the first evening of this conference of our faith fold, the president of our Unitarian

Universalist Association stepped aside, gave up his space at the center, to a Christian Minister, the leader of the United Church of Christ, and a Jewish Rabbi, the leader of the Jewish Reform movement.

Both spoke beautifully, there was applause and a general sense of doo-goody-ness... "look at us we are soooo interfaith!"

Until, that is, being interfaith meant stepping aside ... There was a plan a-foot at the General Assembly to move forward with a divestment from Israeli companies operating in illegal (or you might say, immoral) settlements in the West Bank. The Rabbi pleaded with us, not to divest - but to remain in relationship, to choose the work of transformation *with* the state of Israel, instead of the shaming and punitive work of divestment.

Some attendees reflected that the Rabbi had no business issuing that challenge. I wholly disagree. Whether I agree with his statement or not, it was his business to make it. That's what happens when you de-center, when you invite someone from the margins inside, to **lead**... you hear challenges, you get thrown off balance, and maybe... you grow, and just maybe the world grows a bit more beautiful.

One way to de-center is to invite someone from the margin inside. Another is to step outside, beyond the boundaries that you usually call home.

There was a man on the sidewalk, just outside one of the doors to the General Assembly conference. As I approached, I fished a granola bar out of my purse. It was a terribly hot day in the bright sun, and when the man looked up to thank me, he had to squint and struggle. I don't know what moved in me, but I asked him if I could sit down.

His name is Byron, his wife's name is Faye. He has been out of luck since an injury on a construction job. His knee is mottled with scars. He has over twenty years in construction work. He can paint and do general maintenance. Faye used to be a childcare worker. When I sat down, beside Byron, their lives became the center for me. On occasion crowds from the Assembly would walk by. I saw the legs, the bottoms of their hands, the way their bodies blocked for a moment, the hot sun. Byron put his sign away while we spoke. That matters to me, and I don't know why. (Maybe it was, that for those moments, I was the center for him as well.)

When I got up to leave, I had a mission - to find a local minister to connect with Byron, and a secondary mission of bringing Rev. Scott and another Rev., Leon, with their guitars, back to Byron on the next day - so he could remember how it felt to play. All this came to pass, but what I need to tell you is what came next, what happened when I returned to the convention.

I remember standing inside the conference center, leaning on a pole, trying to figure out where to go next. A security guard walked past me and looked at me strangely... for a long moment - only registering a hesitant release when I looked up at him and smiled

with the confidence of one who belonged. That was when I remembered that I hadn't put my General Assembly badge back on, so I clipped it to my shirt with immediacy. Soon after, a colleague came up to me and led me into the bathroom. A piece of my garment had come unhooked. When she did, I realized that the whole front of my shirt was covered with sweat.

I had been physically changed by de-centering. Sitting with Byron transformed me, and made me look like I was out of place, perhaps dangerous. That's what the security guard saw. When you decenter by crossing a boundary - you may not be recognizable by those who knew you before. This is the danger, but it is also the deliverance.

I try and remember Byron and Faye every day - because I pray I will not use the gift they gave me for my own purposes. Sitting on the sidewalk, there were moments when I was afraid that I was using them. My friends were passing by. Was I there to look holier-than-thou? I try to remember them, Byron and Faye, the whole humans I met, to keep them in the center, to replace my ego with their bodies, their selves - to keep myself a little off balance, and always wading in...

IV Rev Scott

Who remembers Cecil B DeMille's great epic, "The Ten Commandments?"

Moses raises his staff, the Red Sea parts. Rabbi Patricia Neumann shares a famous midrash, or interpretation, showing how the Red Sea really parts.

"In the moment of terror, with Egyptians at their heels and the waters in front, neither Moses nor Miriam are ... acknowledged by the rabbis who comment on this text.

The rabbis concentrate instead on the person who first plunged into the billowing sea--a little known figure whose name is Nachshon ... The rabbis praise him for being the first in line to enter the water. The rabbis distinguish Nachshon as the one who leads all of the Israelites to safety [by being the first to step into the dangerous waters.]"²

Moses had asked the folks to approach the water, to have faith and prepare to cross. But the rabbis suggest that it was less Moses' power and channeling of the divine than the embodied faith of Naschon parting the waters – not the acknowledged leader, but one from the margins. Nothing would happen until one of the flock had the courageous faith to walk towards danger. And the rest – they silently followed Naschon.

Those waters did not part until Naschon waded in – the farther he walked into the sea, the more it parted. We are being asked to do likewise as we seek racial justice.

We have been given a special opportunity – a moment in time pregnant with possibility, challenging us to step into uncharted waters. At Accotink, we selected Racial Reconciliation as this year's Social Justice Study issue. We will invite black leaders to teach and lead us, to be our community of accountability. Led by those living these realities we will investigate the issues straining black communities, including what keeps so many at odds with law enforcement. We will Champion a new moral leadership to emerge, and walk with those who feel their world is unsafe – those who fear for their

² http://web.stanford.edu/group/religiouslife/cgi-bin/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2010/04/20120101_UniversityPublicWorship_sermon.pdf

children every time they leave the house in ways white folks can never fully understand. Brothers and sisters those waters will never recede if we stay situated in our comfy chairs, or surrender to despair.

The waters of violence will not abate if we fear we might have to give something up; if we fear we might be discomforted. ~ How can we show up, listen, and follow? Can we allow the people who live injustice every day to teach us what it means to help in helpful ways – to provide service that is wanted, effective, and just, both in its implementation as well as in its design? ~ I know you – and I know we can do this

So come – rise – we will go to the waters edge.

We will learn from our new teachers – Martin Luther King, Mark Morrison Reed, W.E.B. DuBois, Hurston, Leon Dunkley, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Keith Savage, Alicia Garza – and we will place first our toe, then our foot, then our whole bodies into the water, pushing back the tide of despair, making through it a path of hope and healing towards racial reconciliation. Our next step will be to gather for a “Moral Revival,” Sunday, August 28 5pm at Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church led by Rev Dr William Barber, for a powerful interfaith action in support and solidarity with communities of color.

Who’s that band all dressed in Red? It is you and I and all of us united in love, humility, gratitude and service as we wade, decentered, through the waters of dysfunction and hatred – to claim a promised land lying on the other side of this present danger, and there build a new Dominion of Love and healing. Come – wade with us – Come ...

HYMN #210 – Wade in the Water

Please turn in your gray/blue hymnal to hymn #210 – Wade in the Water. Please rise as you are able as we join our voices in song.

BENEDICTION

Church exists to help us compose a more robust moral imagination, to respond to the destabilization of our age by willingly decentering ourselves, refusing the desire to control the process or to be reactive, thereby growing our empathy.

We deepen our covenants with one another and as we decenter.

May we notice again our captivity, knowing that if our friends and neighbors of color are not free, our souls remain chained.