

*Diversity at the Winter Olympics*

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston, VA

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**READING : “Love Is Not Concerned” by Alice Walker**

Love is not concerned  
 With whom you pray  
 Or where you slept  
 The night you ran away  
 From home  
 Love is concerned  
 That the beating of your heart  
 Should kill no one.

**SERMON**

I expect that almost everyone knows that it's that time in the sports cycle for an important event, and ...no ... this is not a sermon about the Super Bowl. This week the every-four-year Winter Olympics kicks off in Sochi Russia. Yes, the Olympics, winter or summer, represents challenging event planning. This year in particular, the Olympics include extra precautions for the safety of athletes given threats of terrorism in the world. At the same time, this grand tribute to sports also remind us how the world can come together as the eyes of the world focus on the host city and the human activity of sports. Athletes from many countries, many cultures, speaking many languages, and sometimes representing surprisingly different expectations for winter sports --- I understand that the Jamaican bobsled team will again participate --- all united in common goals as they navigate the same giant slalom trail to the bottom of the ski hill, or execute the same repertoire of required figure skating jumps. Different athletes and yet so united by a common endeavor.

Back in December, in response to Russia's anti-gay laws, President Obama took a bold step in announcing in with much public attention that the official American delegation to the Olympics will include several openly gay athletes: most prominently, tennis star Billie Jean King and skating medalist Brian Boitano. Both King and Boitano are known for prowess in their respective sports as well as for their activism for gay rights. Each has also experienced the effects of discrimination due to sexual orientation. There in Sochi will they represent not only American sports but American commitment to diversity. Respect for diversity of sexual orientation in American sports has been broadening recently, as illustrated by the growing roster of prominent athletes who have come out in the past year or so.

This diverse 2014 Olympic delegation represents a position that Unitarian Universalists relate to easily. Unitarian Universalism has been on the leading edge of gay rights for decades, a leader among American denominations in initiatives for welcoming persons of any sexual orientation into congregational life; for ordaining persons of any orientation to ministry, still a mighty contentious topic in many mainstream denominations; and for promoting gay marriage as a civil right.

Recognizing and respecting the diverse ways in which we humans are born into this world: this is

a hallmark of free religion. During February, let us consider the worship theme of “Diversity,” a theme central to the values of free religion. During our Diversity month, I will consider Unitarian Universalism’s attention to gay rights, race relations, and economic diversity. In these services, let us also review various UU projects which promote diversity. The core of liberal religion during its history as long ago as the Reformation of the sixteenth century has been diversity of theology: we promote a range of theological explanations for these questions about life and death that are the provenance of organized religion. Building on the social reforms of our foremothers and forefathers in the nineteenth century, liberal religion also promotes diversity in social identity: in matters of skin color, gender, physical ability, educational background, economic class, and more. Any and all persons who honor the values of this free faith as articulated in the Seven Principles, printed on your Order of Service, are welcome to participate in our congregations.

### Meaning and Importance of Diversity

Let’s consider what we mean by “diversity.” I touched on this topic a few weeks ago when I discussed identity. We clarify the world around us by creating categories. Categories help us explain people, things, places, and more. Using categories to explain life experiences isn’t necessarily ‘bad’: the capacity to categorize helps us make sense of the world around us, so to clarify identity. I do this as a historian: as I observe patterns of activity and behavior in the historical subjects I study and create categories so to better evaluate social movements, trends in human development, and more. What gets us into trouble is when we compare and rank categories and use categories to construct systems of power: the category of rich over poor, male over female, pink over brown skin, straight over gay, and more. We humans love to rank others, resulting in the creation of power structures.

Ranking may be especially acute in religion. Humans have developed many habits that say that there is only one ‘right’ way in religious practice. Think of how many religions around the world promote anything but diversity: state-sponsored religion which requires membership in one and only one church; fundamentalist denominations which require commitment to a particular creed or doctrine; within religious social life, restrictions on social habits dictated by particular denominational norms. It was rebellion from such fundamentalist thinking hundreds of years ago that created liberal religion. Sixteenth-century Unitarian forefather Francis David declared, “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.”

What does it mean then for a culture or an organization to value diversity? It means that many categories of human identity are included in the make-up of that organization. It means that the organization intentionally identifies itself as one which promotes diversity. It also means that categories of identity are not used to establish systems of power. It means that the organization, while presenting a public face that promotes openness and welcome, does not practice implicit habits of “who’s in” and “who’s out.” In congregational life, I regret that too often I’ve experienced groups whose message of welcome goes something like this: “We welcome any and all persons and opinions, as long as they agree with ours.” That’s not respect for diversity.

### Welcoming Congregation

Fortunately, reactions like that are the exception rather than the rule. Our liberal faith expresses diversity in many ways. One denominational program for diversity in matters of sexual orientation is “Welcoming Congregations:” all persons are welcome in our congregations irrespective of

sexual identity. When congregations participate in this program they receive a designation as ‘Welcoming Congregation,’ a signal to person who identify as LGBT that this will be a safe place. UUCR is such a place: a designated Welcoming Congregation. This designation as a Welcoming Congregation also serves as a larger reminder of the importance of welcoming of everyone, all the time, regardless of any human characteristics.

Certainly we all know stories about how being sexually closeted has negative consequences. It hurts when we are not welcomed as we are, when we are forced to live in circumstances which do not make it safe to realize our full and authentic identities. Consider other manifestations of being closeted:

- Teenagers who feel physical attractions which they can’t sort out and don’t have safe places to go for help
- Professionals who can’t include photos of same-sex loved ones on their desks at work for fear of reprisal
- End-of-life patients in hospitals whose life partners are denied access to sit by their bedside
- Persons of all ages struggling with the feeling that they were born into the ‘wrong’ gender

We must celebrate how UU congregations are a haven of welcome. The Welcoming Congregations program articulates and reinforces that commitment.

What does being welcoming, in any setting, mean to you? My words to describe welcoming include friendliness, a sense of community, a feeling of direct communications, of being accepted without qualification, without unspoken insider rules determining behavior. When we experience these qualities --- perhaps attending a book group, or a community meeting, or meeting future in-laws for the first time, or walking into a congregation for the first time --- we likely go away from that experience saying, ‘That felt so welcoming.’

The quality of Welcome is inherent in the meaning of free religion: said theologically, Welcome is ontological to the different perspectives inherent in free religion. In free religion, there is more than one way for just about everything. We welcome a diversity of theological views. We consider a range of social components of our identities as part and parcel of religious connections. We welcome the whole person into this faith community. Indeed, in free religion, we practice radical hospitality towards both newcomers and old-timers.

I wager we all have stories of being both welcomed and shunned in new situations. I had an example awhile back of how NOT to be welcoming. This was not in a church setting, just in case you’re trying to figure out what congregation I might be referring to. I attended an event for the first time. As an interim ministers, I am fairly accustomed to walking into a new group and initiating conversation. So in this particular setting, I did just that: I walked in and introduced myself. One of the first persons I introduced myself to told me my being there insulted her! Whoa, where did that come from? I don’t know what I did, but I must have violated some unspoken habit of the group culture. Her remark caught me off guard, and I know that my outward open demeanor switched immediately to one of caution. At any rate, very few other folks in the group welcomed me. I left early and came away saying, ‘Wow, they sure don’t know how to welcome newcomers.’” Funny, isn’t it, how quickly we know if we are welcomed, through body language, or smiles, or

outright words. I never returned to that group event, even though it was in a convenient location to where I lived and met regularly every two weeks.

Have you heard reports that newcomers to a church probably decide within the first ten minutes if this is the place for them? I expect that applies to other settings as well: it did in the scene I just described where I knew quickly that I did not belong. In contrast was the welcome I received from Gladys, the women standing at the door of First Unitarian Church Pittsburgh the first time I attended a UU church. She'd been greeting folks at that door for years. I was nervous, doing this church thing, you know, after years away from organized religion. I greeted Gladys by telling her my name and she said back, 'Oh you're Barbara Coeyman.' She recognized my name from both the music community in Pittsburgh and a weekly show on Baroque music I had on local public radio. She knew everyone in that congregation and knew just who to connect me with. I joined that congregation soon thereafter. How we are welcomed matters. Think back on your first visit here, or to another group which you are currently part of: what was the welcome like? How do you demonstrate welcome to others?

### Being a Welcoming Congregation

Back to the UUA Welcoming Congregation program. Who of us here remembers participating in this congregation's program? UUCR became a Welcoming Congregation in 2000.

Grounded on the first principle of Unitarian Universalism's acceptance of the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, the Welcoming Congregations program was developed in the 1990s as a response to reports that gays and lesbians were experiencing prejudice in our supposedly open, accepting congregations. The program offers congregations intentional steps to rid themselves of habits which marginalize others because of sexual orientation. The program was created by the office of Identities-Based Ministry, dedicated to promoting free religion as a means to honor our total identities. How we understand the holy --- or how we understand the holy we don't believe in --- is influenced by many factors of our identities, including gender, sexual orientation, economic status, physical ability, and more. That is, we humans construct God in our own image and any aspect of our identity is fair for being holy.

Soon after the Welcoming Congregations program started, Rev. Scott Alexander published a Handbook to guide this work. To date, two-thirds of all Unitarian Universalist congregations have become Welcoming Congregations, enabling them to hold their own workshops on the subject. When UUCR became a Welcoming Congregation, you also received your maroon poster, the signal to visitors that you are participate in this justice-making program. How many know where your poster is displayed today? --- I'll send you on a treasure hunt of sorts, to find it after the service. --- If you know where it's located, would you please not tell --- let others eyes stay open for observing the building. Could I suggest that the poster might be displayed more prominently. Since this program was created, study materials have been revised several times. It is recommended that congregations take refresher courses at least every ten year: seem like it might be time for UUCR to review the Welcoming Congregations program.

Welcoming Congregations addresses GBLT topics specifically, but really, the principles of this program help congregation be all the more welcoming generally. As you hear some of the goals of Welcoming Congregations, doesn't this just sound like good all-around health for any religious

community, and also for the Winter Olympics:

- A Welcoming Congregation considers the acceptance of LGBT persons at every level of congregation life and programming, and is non-discriminating in the selection of lay leaders and religious professionals.
- A Welcoming Congregation does not make assumptions about anyone's sexual orientation and gender identity.
- A Welcoming Congregation actively promotes itself as such.
- A Welcoming Congregation offers ceremonies of union and other life passages to all.
- A Welcoming Congregation affirms display of affection by all persons.
- A Welcoming Congregation encourages dialogue among GBLT persons and their allies.
- A Welcoming Congregation recognizes holidays such as Coming Out Day in October and Transgender Day of Remembrance in November .
- A Welcoming Congregation celebrates the lives of all people.
- A Welcoming Congregation is just a darn good welcoming place to be.

#### Other UUA Resources

In addition to Welcoming Congregations, there are many other resources from our denomination that congregations may draw on. Access to these resources is one of the many benefits of membership in the UUA. Let's review a few others briefly, to expand all the more Unitarian Universalism's commitment to diversity.

Since liberal religion promotes the welcoming of the whole self, no wonder that we called our award-winning sex ed program 'Our Whole Lives,' or OWL. This year here at UUCR you are offering OWL for middle schoolers, 9 a.m. each Sunday morning.

Closely related to Welcoming Congregations is the UUA's Marriage Equality program. Through the years we've taken various stands on marriage for all: marriage determined by how you love, not whom you love. One of the Marriage Equality activities UUs are most proud of is of being in the forefront when the Massachusetts Supreme Court passed gay marriage in 2006. Two of the plaintiffs in that case were Unitarian Universalist, and their marriage was the first to be performed in Massachusetts, the ceremony held at UUA headquarters by then President Sinkford just after the court decision. UU ministers are often the only clergy in smaller communities willing to perform GBLT ceremonies. UUs have also been in the forefront of advocacy in the fourteen states to date where gay marriage is legal.

In 2009 Unitarian Universalists also began the 'Standing on the Side' program. This program is realized in varied projects devoted to countering oppression and violence. You've probably seen the yellow shirts and banners, which identify Unitarian Universalists at rallies such as the March on Washington this past summer. Wearing our shirts illustrates that Standing on the Side of Love does make a difference. I encourage each of you to keep your ears open to opportunities for public witness coming up in the next months, especially when the weather is warmer: a chance to Stand on the Side of Love, with or without yellow tee-shirts. Later this month, our music director, Nichole, and I plan to include our popular new hymn by Jason Shelton, 'Standing on the Side of Love,' in one of our worship services. If you don't know it yet, we predict that you'll like it.

### Safe Congregations

There is another important UUA program that UUCR is well engaged in: that of Safe Congregations, devoted to ethics of right relations within congregations: how will we be together in trusting, safe, nurturing habits of community and communication. The program originated because of clergy misconduct toward congregants, a topic many of you know about well. You as a congregation also created a Safe Congregations Task Force, which produced a comprehensive report on clergy misconduct in 2011. Today the Safe Congregations program has expanded beyond clergy and congregants, to address conduct between congregants themselves, and especially between adults and children, and between children to one another. No one who participates in any congregation should be subject to abuse of power that comes with inappropriate violations of physical boundaries. Abuse and misconduct toward any individual has an impact on the entire community. It is our moral mandate to be Safe, an important marker of congregational identity. Please congratulate Paul Baumgartner for heading up UUCR's new Safe Congregations team. You'll be hearing more from them in the near future.

### Call to the Welcoming

What does it mean for UUCR to be a Welcoming Congregation? It means participation in an intentional program of the same name, to promote welcoming of all. It means practicing radical hospitality and deep listening regardless of categories of identity. The hand of welcome that reached out to me on my first visit to the Pittsburgh UU Church really mattered: I was not in a good place in my life then. I really needed that hand. Had it not been there, I might not have stayed... and then, as they say ... well, the rest might not be history ... I might not be here with you today, living out my call to ministry in this liberal faith.

Unitarian Universalism's commitment to sexual diversity also has personal meaning for me. Our advocacy for Marriage Rights is making a difference in my family. This coming May, I will be standing on a hillside in western Massachusetts attending the marriage ceremony of my daughter Amanda and her partner, Abbey. Some of you met them when they visited here before Christmas. They met as teammates on the women's rugby team at University of Massachusetts. Their friendship progressed into love. They are lucky: they live in a state where they do not have to ponder limitations on their commitment to one another. They are fortunate recipients of this good work for Marriage Rights that UUs helped lead. Their lives have been forever touched by Unitarian Universalists' commitment to Stand on the Side of Love.

Our programs, our attitudes, our commitment to diversity do make a difference. Standing on the Side of Love matters, to individuals, to society, to our Olympic athletes these two weeks during what may be the most exciting venture of their lives. Our ministry of Welcome and support for the diversity of human creation is a holy act. How will you practice radical hospitality? How will you be welcoming?

MAY THIS BE SO

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