

The Invasion of the Body

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered October 23, 2016
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I'll begin today by talking about something that may seem mundane – a conversation and action that happened at our Board of Trustees meeting this last Thursday. If any of you are under the assumption that serving on the Board of a church such as this one is just a bunch of boring meetings, looking over mundane reports, and fretting about budgets and money, I offer you this story as a rejoinder to that. For this last Thursday, your – our – elected Board of Trustees undertook a very courageous conversation and followed up with an even more courageous action. And a very difficult one at the same time, one that asked each member to search his or her heart to find the values that she or he finds most dear.

As you might guess, the conversation and action I'm talking about has to do with this church's decision whether or not to host an Extreme Winter Weather Shelter for people without homes again this winter. After much deliberation, and consideration of some very real problems and risks, their answer was yes. Unanimously.

That's the short version, which doesn't tell you anything that you haven't already heard or soon will. But there's a bigger story underneath this – or maybe several stories – that I want to relate to you this morning before getting to the heart of my sermon.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima has, for the last five years, hosted one of these shelters that the City of Yakima approves and are funded previously by Yakima County, now by the Yakima Valley Conference of Governance. Four of these years, the shelters were run by

the faith-based non-profit Sunrise Outreach; last year and this the contracting agency is Yakima Neighborhood Health Services. The first year we hosted the shelter, it was the Women's shelter, and it was held downstairs in our Fellowship Hall area. At least in part because ours was a new shelter in the system that winter, the usage was minimal. Many nights we had only one or two or even no guests, and I think the maximum for one night that winter was less than six. Then the next two winters, we hosted the Men's shelter here, and the usage was much greater. The second year of doing that, we had a maximum capacity of thirty men, and it was at or near capacity every night all winter long.

The consensus from that experience was that was a bit too much for us, our building, and the staff and volunteers. So the following year – our fourth – we again hosted the women, but not in our Fellowship Hall but in the other end of our building at the space we rent to the Rainbow Cathedral. We had significantly more utilization that year than our first year with the women, but it was still far fewer people than those big years hosting the men. Our capacity in this arrangement was fifteen. So naturally it didn't wind up being as big an intrusion into our space, especially because it wasn't even really in our space – it was in Rainbow Cathedral's space.

Then last year, of course, we hosted the women again in basically the same physical arrangement. The other big change was that was the first year that Neighborhood Health oversaw the shelters – a change that was made right before the season started, which proved to be a big change and challenge for us. They were completely new to shelter oversight, and although they have an extensive staff that provides excellent medical and

social services, they knew very little about volunteer management. So it was kind of a rough year, but in the end, it was a success by most any measure. We provided well over five hundred actual bed-nights for vulnerable women last winter, five hundred times a woman might have been out on the streets in the cold for a night but instead found a hot meal and a warm bed, all without any significant incidents of violence, damage, or injury.

This year Neighborhood Health has again been appointed the overseeing agency, and luckily their same staff people – who learned a lot last year – have been preparing for several weeks now in anticipation of the shelter opening in mid-November. The major challenges last year – filling in for all the missing links in the volunteer chain and advance preparation by Neighborhood Health – wound up mostly being addressed by me and by our Office Manager, Genevieve Gonzales. We each volunteered a lot of extra time to address issues and try to make things go as smoothly as possible. When I began to have conversations with Neighborhood Health back in August about whether we'd host the shelter again this year, we wanted some reassurance that we'd have enough volunteers to make it run smoothly, and I began working with people at other shelters and churches helping to recruit them. So I was happy to report to the Board last night, that in a meeting last week, Neighborhood Health has some sixteen potential overnight volunteers for the women's shelter alone scheduled to go into a training this Wednesday, some three weeks before the shelter opens.

So that's very good, and provides a great deal of reassurance that things will go better this year. But of course, reassurance is no guarantee.

As we learned about it and got into it, we were again confronted with the reality that hosting a shelter always involves some risk, some inconvenience, and potentially some sacrifice from the hosting community. So as I prepared a proposal for the Board to consider this year, the picture that emerged for me was this: This project started five years ago as essentially a real estate deal – we pretty much turned over our keys to another agency and let them run the shelter. But over the years, it has evolved into something different. It is a ministry of this church. So the question before the board was: are we entering a real estate deal in which we're going to be passive participants in some other organization's project? Or are we going to dive in and make this shelter *our* project?

Their answer was: it's ours. After much deliberation and consideration of different scenarios, your Board of Trustees voted unanimously to hold the shelter here again this winter, but not down in the Rainbow Cathedral hall, but back in our own basement – Fellowship Hall, kitchen, Garden Room. They took this action after I informed them that because I thought a project like this should be directed and owned by the congregation and not its staff, that I would only play a supportive role from this point forward. In the last couple of weeks we've had some people volunteer – Bill Jacobs, Chuck Forster, Carole Sahlstrand, and Ray Yates – to be “hosts” for the shelter. The plan – the commitment, actually – is for UUCY to have at least one person, preferably two, here each night to open the shelter for the guests, welcome them here, and make sure everything is in order for the night. One of us will also come by in the morning when the shelter closes to make sure everything is closed safely and securely. These four people deserve a big thanks for volunteering. And I'd say that they'd love to have

more of you volunteer to be a part of the team. I know that most of you aren't able to pull an all-night shift in a shelter on any regular basis at all, but if you'd like to be part of this ministry, and could come by for just an hour or so one or two evenings a week, and maybe a morning or two, you'd be welcome to join this effort. If this might be you, please talk to me or Bill, Chuck, Ray, or Carole.

I think this could be the most exciting year yet for this church and the Extreme Weather Shelter, with UUCY not only showing itself as a building in the community, but as real people with real faces. We also might learn, by the end of the season, that this work is not really our ministry and maybe we should make it the last winter in which a shelter is here for a while. We'll see.

Thanks to you and to your Board, we will see.

But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about today. I wanted to talk about something far more global, and far more personal at the same time. I also want to talk about how this project of hosting the shelter, and some specific events related to it, exists somewhere in the middle of that vast stretch of mostly empty space between the events of the world broadcast over the evening news and the well-guarded secrets in our hearts. But as we know, things are interconnected even across vast stretches of empty space; the global, the local, and the intensely personal are all connected – a spark on one end can cause a firestorm on another, just as compassion anywhere on this spectrum can offer a healing balm for generations.

Another way to look at it is captured by the song we heard: body is the temple of the spirit. The body is close and intimate, the only thing that's

truly ours (or at least it should be;) the spirit transcends all. The personal and the universal are intimately connected.

A few weeks ago, on a day that may have seemed like any other day, many of us heard a news item that certainly, on the surface, sounded like any other news item in this bizarre election year. It seems as though one particular candidate for President of the United States, one who seems very adept at actually drawing support from making controversial claims and breaking cultural taboos, was caught on video saying things that are normally considered way beyond respectable for a major public figure, depicting illegal acts, things that would warrant an “R” rating if it were in a motion picture.

Now, many of you are like me, and try to ignore all the mudslinging and tabloid journalism that goes along with Presidential election campaigns, which has been especially virulent this year. I could simply leave it at that – and encourage all of you to ignore this whole charade for the next few weeks and turn to one another and our community for healthy camaraderie and support. That’s not bad advice.

But I also feel it is insufficient. As a professional Minister in a tax-exempt church, of course, I can’t advise you on how I think you should vote; nor do I want you, because I trust you all enough to figure that out on your own. But I do feel called, as a professional Minister, to speak out about this event – particularly as a male Minister; particularly as a straight, white, middle-class, cis-identified, English-speaking, able-bodied, American male Minister. And to speak out against the actions depicted in the video or the Presidential candidate, and his attempts to brush it aside and minimize it, is not about partisan politics. It is far more personal than that.

It is an invasion into the most private and sacred of spaces – an invasion of the body.

Let me be clear that I'm not just talking about the conversation that was caught on video a decade ago, or any real events that may have been referred to in it alone. Yes, both those events are deplorable, and bring into serious question a democracy which tolerates such episodes from those on the threshold of major public power. But it is also the replaying of such events, the almost callous way that they were referred to, and even celebrated by this man's political opponents. There is nothing to celebrate in this, and even the prospect that being exposed thusly might lessen this candidate's chances of becoming our next President is pretty thin gruel for those who feel violated by the images that invaded our living rooms, our workplaces, and even the temples of our bodies these last few weeks.

It is hard to overestimate the prevalence of the various and interlocking forms of violence committed against women in this country, even in the apparently enlightened twenty-first century. Officially, about two-thirds of women America experience some form of sexual assault in their lifetimes. Think about that. As you look around this room, or any other room, think about the likelihood that two out of three women – as well as nearly one out of four men, mostly when they're young – experience some documentable form of sexual assault. Add to that all those who are groped, grabbed, leered at, talked down to, exploited, harassed, and have to repeatedly hear reminders of the patriarchal assumption that their own bodies do not belong to them, and maybe we can begin to grasp the enormity of this violence.

It is also hard to fathom – and I say this as a man who has never experienced sexual assault myself – the lingering pain that goes along with the trauma. It's not only a bodily violation, but as the body is the temple of the spirit, it is a violation of the most sacred space imaginable. It is one of those incredible situations in which people no longer own their own bodies. I don't know how humans heal from this kind of invasion, or if we ever truly do. But I do know that the scars are tender and raw, and can get opened up at the slightest provocation. I also know that what transpired was cannot be brushed aside as "locker room talk;" it was violent and hurtful no matter the circumstance.

So what I'm talking about here is not taking sides among these Presidential candidates, but I am wondering what we as a healing community are called to do when the boundaries of political discourse crumble, and the very system that is supposed to empower us instead invades us and rips open some of the most tender wounds some of us carry? The only answer I know is we need to hold one another in our covenant – respectfully, with compassion and caring and love. We need to continually expand our own preconceptions beyond what our own experiences tell us, and be willing to be changed by the experiences of others.

Also, speaking as a man to men, we need to understand our culpability in perpetuating this culture of patriarchy, and must not tolerate talk like this in any circumstance.

(For Shelter and Beyond, by Marge Piercy)

Earlier I made an oblique reference earlier to events that occur somewhere in the middle of this vast interconnected space between the

global affairs of the world and the personal sanctuaries of our hearts. Many of you know that I've been working quite a bit these past few weeks trying to make preparations for the decision the Board made the other night about the shelter. I've been to many meetings and have been talking to lots of people, and in the process I've wound up hearing a lot of stereotypes about women, particularly as what we've been working on is a shelter for women. Although I've been pretty attuned myself to recognizing the stereotypes when I hear them, I surprised myself when, in an email exchange with some of the good people here preparing this ministry, I spouted some pretty clear and potentially offensive stereotypes about women, not only in the words I wrote but also in the way I had been going about these preparations. Whenever you're dealing with something like a shelter for homeless women, it's easy to get sucked into conforming to stereotypes because of the layers of oppression and categorization we're often dealing with – women, of course, but also women who are or were homeless, women without basic education, women who are or have been addicted to drugs, women with mental illness or other disabilities are some of the interlocking stereotypes that we have to unpack. It is, indeed, harder to recognize our prejudices when we are swimming in these many-layered complexities.

Well, so it was that I got lost in this morass, and my words and attitude came out in a way that may have been hurtful to people who have been told they are lesser people. I apologize for this, and sincerely thank our own Merrill Thomsen for calling me out for promulgating stereotypes. That's what she says she feels she did: call me out for expressing values that contradict our Unitarian Universalist principles. When she and I talked

about it, I recalled a similar event that happened not long ago at a UU Minister's gathering. One Minister said something that provoked a reaction among another, who called the first one out on the inappropriate language used. Some tense discussion ensued, and then, several months later at the next meeting, a group discussion resulted in a re-definition of what had transpired. And in this new definition, the person wasn't "called out" so much as he was "called in," called in to closer and more authentic relationship to everyone in the group. In order to be in that closer and more authentic relationship, everyone needs to stand on the common ground of our humanity – or at least the community of which we speak – and not on the limited tarmac defined by our prejudices and preconceptions that don't include everyone. If and when a person in a group says or does something that excludes others, that person needs to be called back in to the circle of wholeness and healing that defines true community.

And so it is that I believe I've been called back in to this community, and I invite all of you, whenever you feel excluded, to call us back in to the community that embraces us all. Call us all in with our various experiences, our pain as well as our joy, our anxieties as well as our strength, our darkness as well as our light. That's what true community is; healing community, community that guides us back to the sanctity of our own bodies, and opens the windows to our souls.

How Could Anyone by Libby Roderick



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