

Here Come the Love People  
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Beacon UU Congregation  
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Liz Perkins wondered if I had one. A clergy shirt. It was March 2013, six years ago, and we were wrapping up the First “Pop Up Institute” adult education Day at First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh. Dennis Brunn from the UUPLAN - UU Pennsylvania Legislative Advocacy Network had given a fantastic workshop on “Being UU in the Public Square” and we were getting acquainted and chatting in the Gallery as folks streamed out the door after a satisfying day.

Nope. No clergy shirt. Liz, a former congregant, is one of the dedicated UUPLAN organizers, and explained to me that clergy are taken more seriously by legislators when they are wearing a clerical collar. A stole won’t cut it. The shirt with the collar conveys authority. Somehow it improves the hearing of lawmakers.

Liz gently plugged the purchase: “They are bombarded by well-funded evangelicals and conservatives,” she explained. “Maybe I might get one soon and we could go knock on some doors? They need to hear from liberal clergy, too.”

Great idea. Sure. I went online and saved some possibilities...but being a neophyte, I wasn’t even sure what collar type was appropriate for a Unitarian minister. I didn’t want to end up looking like the Vicar of Dibley! So, I perused my colleague’s Facebook pages and even consulted a blog called “Beauty Tips for Ministers” (I kid you not) and I figured it out.

But, I couldn’t quite close the deal with myself and wondered why. Was it my Jewish background? That didn’t seem to stop my UU colleagues, the Reverends Lavanhar, Weinstein, Lerner, and Morgenstern. Was it that I perceived my ministry as mostly one of spiritual and personal growth - preaching and teaching and pastoral presence? I’m not going to do THAT in a collar!

Was it that it was just so “ministry” (even a little pretentious) and that I didn’t want the shirt to be the first thing people saw when they looked at me, drawing assumptions, projecting stereotypes, and proceeding to lob probing questions about my theology and initiating arguments about God? As I’ve discovered at nearly every social event, it’s complicated enough being minister without advertising it.

Time passed and Liz inquired again, in her persuasive but non-abrasive manner, about the shirt. Did I have one? Nope, not yet. But I’m workin’ on it. “Great, because we need liberal clergy to get in there and offer our perspective.” Yes. Of course we do. I’m on it. Really. And I’m thinking, “What is wrong with me? It’s just a shirt, for Pete’s sake.” So, I order one in March of 2015, after being deeply inspired by dispatches from the Justice GA the previous summer, during which an army of my colleagues marched here in Arizona against border brutality in their clergy shirts and “Standing on the side of love” (SOTSOL) stoles.

Ok – here goes, I thought. I chose an oxford blue button-down style with a tab collar. Very classic. Permanent press! I'm pumped. The shirt comes, I unwrap it and go to try it on. But, I can't. One of the sleeves is sewn shut! I laughed out loud at this cosmic joke. It was as if the Universe was taunting me, confirming my struggle and ambivalence. I sent it back and ordered the one I'm wearing today from a different vendor. "Beauty Tips for Ministers" thought a jersey pullover style would be more flattering anyway. And who am I to argue?

So, I want to thank Liz Perkins, in absentia, for her persistence. A month later, in my clergy garb, I accompanied her and several other congregants on a visit to PA Representative Mark Mustio to talk about the Patient Trust Act and "taking politics out of the exam room."

When I told a friend about that upcoming visit, she said it was like a "coming out." I suppose in some ways this is true. More accurately, it was a debut of an aspect of my ministry that had been evolving over the nearly 20 years of my ministry.

I will be deliberately putting my clergy-self out there more often so that people DO see the collar first and perceive it as a sign that I am willing to wear my faith and my convictions on my sleeve (not in the pulpit, typically -today is special- but when I am "hot under the collar" and the symbol might matter.)

I've worn it to the Women's March in Washington, DC and to the March for our Lives in Ohio. I've worn it at Pride parades, vigils, and protests. I will it here in town, on the Arizona border, and in the spaces in between.

Yet, even more so - it is a "walking willing" pledge (as Sister Simone Campbell, the feisty nun who riled the church hierarchy, might call it). Or, a "Standing on the side of love" vow, in our UU parlance. And, as you can see, I am now the proud owner of this "Side with Love" stole, as well.

Sometimes, when you make that decision to "walk willing" or "stand on the side of love" the dots get connected for you in unexpected, even life-changing ways. Around the time I purchased this shirt, I had the privilege of hearing attorney Bryan Stevenson, author of Just Mercy, a UUA Common Read book, give an incredibly compelling lecture at Carnegie Music Hall.

And, as I listened to him recount stories of racism, mercy and redemption, especially in the juvenile justice system, I had an epiphany. Stevenson discovered to his surprise that he had influence. And he knew he could not squander it. He pursued every avenue for using it and made an enormous difference in the lives of his clients. The very day we heard him speak, the Supreme Court abolished life sentences for juveniles and he helped make that happen.

How could I have missed this point in my own life...that I have so much potential influence as a minister and that I had been keeping it on a hanger in the closet?

I may seem late to the party, but I didn't have a thing to wear! All joking aside, I made the decision and I am renewing it now, to walk willing, to walk towards trouble, wearing a visible symbol of the power given to me by my

community, and I look forward to discovering how my influence might result in positive outcomes or change through UJAZ and other efforts, here in Flagstaff.

Will you join me? As Garrison Keillor once quipped: "Once you've pack your bags for the Promised Land, it's hard to go back to Motel 6."

So, let's not go back. Let's walk forward, willingly. My colleagues inspire me in this journey with their own recounted experiences. The Rev. Amy Carol Webb tells this story: "When marriage equality was in the courts in South Florida," she writes, "I arrived at the courthouse steps one morning having forgotten my stole with the rainbow stripe, and so arrived with only my collared blouse under a tailored black blazer. The way the demonstration was staged, the only way I could get to the equality advocates was through the non-equality folks."

"As I approached," she continues, "the non-equality folks saw me and started up greetings 'Oh, Pastor, we're so glad to see you here. Thank you, thank you for coming,' and such. Then of course they got terribly confused and startlingly quiet as I passed on through, blessed them along the way, and joined the rainbow folks across the rope line."

"Soon after, a lead attorney for equality who knows me spotted me and shouted through the megaphone, "Hey Rev., you here to MARRY some people?" To which I shouted, "You bet I am!!" "UU, right?!" "Absolutely!" There was cheering. Reporters captured it -- which served both the action and our standing in the community well."

Back in 2004, UUs like the good Rev. Webb agreed to walk towards trouble to demand first marriage equality, and then over time, economic justice, racial justice, immigration justice, and environmental justice. The Standing on the Side of Love organization was born. Today, we know this campaign by the gold logo and slogan, revised as "Side With Love." At the annual Pride parades, the T-shirts are everywhere...a sea of gold marchers, walking willing, in love and solidarity towards sacred trouble. At General Assembly, it's practically a uniform. (UU game day clothes!)

I suppose you could even call it our brand. During a Pittsburgh Cluster Assembly several years ago, the keynote speaker, the Rev. Vail Weller, remembered marching here in Arizona, in that demonstration I mentioned earlier, with lots of folks in gold T-shirts and overhearing someone on the sidewalk remark: "Hey, here Come the Love People." So, thank you, Vail, for my title today. "The Love People" -- isn't it heartening to know that there are folks who think of UUs as "the love people?"

What does it take to be a "love person?" Ask yourself this question when you have time to ponder it.

Another of my colleagues, the Rev. Jo Crawford, is among the love people. Every Friday, she dons her collar and heads to a local coffee shop. She is a veritable "Sister of St. Arbucks." Rev. Jo parks herself at a visible table and saves a seat for the brokenhearted. And, they come. But, it's not about the collar or gold t-shirt, really (although this certainly creates a welcome mat).

Being a love person is about so many deeper things. Knowing what and who you love and why, and then turning towards them, rather than away. Learning what it means to THEM to feel securely loved and then not withholding that. It's about basic, simple kindness. It's about loving strangers compassionately just because they need someone to love them, care about them, and not let them fall through the cracks of a hardened society. It's about loving what breaks and loving what endures. Loving the questions more than the answers. Striving to be curious, not furious, in the search for truth and meaning.

How many ways might you share the love today or tomorrow or the next day or the next? It may happen in a politician's office, or in your child's school or your parent's assisted living facility, at a "No More Deaths" demonstration, a peace rally, canvassing during an election cycle, or at the bedside of someone who might otherwise die alone. You could be a love person with a grieving co-worker or with a refugee you have sheltered, a spouse in recovery, a prison pen pal, or a bullied trans teen you might be mentoring.

And like so many other aspects of our lives, being a love person begins at home. It begins with you in your heart of hearts. And, then it expands out to include your intimates, then your friends, your community, your society, our global home.

In our current political and societal wilderness, our commitment to cultivating the following five habits of the heart is more crucial than ever. I believe Sister Simone would approve of this list.

These habits are: 1. An understanding that we are all in this together; 2. An appreciation of the value of otherness; 3. An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways; 4. A sense of personal voice and agency; and 5. A capacity to create community.

The writer Terry Tempest Williams reminds us that "the human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up and trust our fellow citizens to join us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?"

The Rev. Martin Luther King echoed this call to action when he preached: "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the creation of justice?"

Perhaps you have never noticed that the word Justice appears three times in our Unitarian Universalist principles. Suppose that makes it a keynote of our faith, eh? So, do you have to be activist to be a UU? The Winter of UU World asked six UU leaders this question and you can still find this article online.

None of them was willing to offer an unequivocal "Yes." However, they all agreed that we are called through our covenantal faith to activate our principles in

some tangible way. To activate the heart, to activate fairness, and activate peacemaking.

We should never guilt one another for not being UU enough because we are not all expressing our commitments to justice in identical visible ways.

One of the respondents in the article worried that we UUs expect activism to be big and results to be immediate, or we become discouraged and fall away.

Friends, there are so many ways to be an activist, and a compassionate participant in justice making. As Sister Simone reminds us, sometimes its mostly about “daring to try and reaching for something new.” I recently met with our Social Justice Allies and emphasized a focus on mobilizing our congregation to join with others, non-UUs, to build up this world, piece by laborious piece.

This is known as *inter-sectionality* and it works. It calls for activating something you care deeply about and mobilizing outside of your insular group. This could take the form of marching, or sending postcards, or supporting scholarships to assemblies and programs, or co-sponsoring forums. Please spend some time reflecting on what area of activism you might feel called to activate and link your arms and hearts with our Social Justice Allies and other Beacon members.

To walk willing as community, we need to feel that we are in community...and there are many ways to accomplish that – Circle dinners, Chalice circles, helping finish the building project, making coffee or serving as a greeter.

The other day, I also spoke at length at Janine Gelsinger, the energetic, new director of UJAZ. She spoke here last month about Social Justice as a Spiritual Practice. Janine ran down the program for the Issues and Actions Day in Surprise on Saturday, October 26, and I was beyond excited about the workshops and speakers she has planned.

For example, Social Justice Discernment- Saying Yes and No to opportunities based on your passions and skills; climate justice from the perspective of the indigenous community, power mapping for strategic activism, how to effectively canvass during an election, and Immigration Bystander training. There is siesta time planned and an awards dinner, too.

Janine has some other compelling projects planned through UJAZ, too...there website is [ujaz.org](http://ujaz.org).

Oh, and the \$50 registration fee includes three meals, too. And there will be home hospitality from UUs in Surprise and a worship service Sunday at their church. We are planning to offer at least 2 \$50 scholarships to attend. But, let's take a car full or two and come back with new ideas and enthusiasm. Speak to me or Roz Clark if you'd like to attend and also if you wish to receive a registration scholarship.

I believe we Beacon sojourners will return to Flagstaff energized, activated, and connected, not just to one another but also to the wider justice work of our movement and our region.

Then, when they see us “walking willing” through our broad doors and towards trouble clad in gold, a bright blue clergy shirt, or otherwise, I’m hoping someone notices us and announces to everybody in earshot–

“Get ready, folks. Here come the love people.”

So may it be. Side with Love. Share the Love. Amen.

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