

PRIDE SUNDAY:
The Rainbow Fish Keeps Their Scales
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
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When my children were growing up, we were always surrounded by piles of books; Books we purchased or borrowed from the local library, and some were clear favorites. And many were classics or well-known stories such as The Giving Tree, Love You Forever, and The Rainbow Fish. The morals and messages in these favorites seemed so perfectly aligned with our household values, melding my close-knit Jewish upbringing and UU progressive principles. My children especially loved The Rainbow Fish with its glistening 3-D pages and my daughter even received a stuffed Rainbow Fish lovie as a gift one birthday from a friend.

But children grow up and so do their parents – we grow in self-interrogation and awareness of how stories that appear positive and uplifting can impart previously unrecognized unhealthy messages, too.

There's where the writer Topher Payne comes in. He has recast all of the aforementioned stories for a higher and broader consciousness...he took out the cringy parts and made the stories more woke without being precious about it. The Giving Tree is now The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries; Love You Forever has morphed into Love You Forever, And I'll Call Before I Come Over, and the story that frames our PRIDE SERVICE today, The Rainbow Fish, swims into our midst as The Rainbow Fish That Keeps Their Scales. (originally "his" scales, but adapted here for inclusion)

Let's watch a video of the story in its original form as our starting point... (VIDEO here, watch the Youtube service for full version)

OK, so you can see why parents and kids like this story – it's about sharing and humility and how to make friends. No problem there. Yet, what Topher Payne so astutely points out is that the story also requires the Rainbow Fish to relinquish what makes them special and unique and diminish themselves for the comfort of others in order to be accepted. Yes, it keeps the part about humility, too...however.... Let's pick up the story at the point of Payne's rewrite, when our shimmering swimmer encounters the Catfish.

...(VIDEO here, watch the Youtube service for full version)

Earlier we heard from our new Office Manager, Alexei Besser-Gilbert, about his journey of embracing his true gender identity and self. He is a stained-glass rainbow fish that has kept his scales. And he shares the insight that, for him, labelling and identity nuances have always been difficult. Terms have come and gone in the queer community-words that were just words once are now teeming with such hate that you wouldn't dare say them in casual conversation, and there are new terms and understandings of old terms every day, it seems!

In the 1980s and 90s, when the word “welcoming” became a code word for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched the Welcoming Congregation Program to help us learn how to undo homophobia—and later, transphobia (prejudice against transgender people)—in our hearts and minds, our congregations, and our communities.

Beacon completed that program some years ago but it is time for us to renew our status as a Welcoming Congregation, with new understandings in the offing. I am putting out the bold challenge to you to join me in deeper self-interrogation and inquiry, new learning and genuine engagement with LGBTQIA folx we currently know or those we are yet to meet. People like Alexei, Gabriel before him, and other Rainbow Fish you strive to wear their shimmering and unique scales proudly and safely.

We might decide to read and discuss the UUA report entitled “Widening The Circle Of Concern” that primarily focuses on the work of racial justice and dismantling white supremacy culture (another area of growth), yet imparts wisdom applicable to all areas of inclusion. For example, the take-aways that unconscious bias is real, and when unaddressed, creates toxic organizations that can, in turn, be toxic to LGBTQIA folx and people of color.

Without blame or shame, I would reckon that we likely have some implicit programming based on whiteness, even if it is not evident in our behavior or even our conscious thoughts. I’d argue that if we are cis-gender and/or heterosexual, the same implicit programming is there, even if it is dormant.

Addressing unconscious bias requires education, not guilt and many good tools are available. Such as the offerings of the Transforming Hearts Collective that were lifted up by trans educator Alex Kapitan when zey led zer service, “A Radical Welcome,” on our YouTube channel on August 16, 2020. You can find that recording there.

For instance, in January 2018, they led a program called “Creating Radical Culture Shift” at one of our congregation in Wisconsin. Here’s how the program was described: In our faith community, being a Welcoming Congregation is about more than being friendly. It means actively working to dismantle the forces in our world that teach us that some people are better, normal, more valuable and other people are lesser than, other, outsiders. What would it take to create a culture here at our church in which no one—of any gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, or age—is “other” or doesn’t belong? Come explore and practice this together, and find out what’s required of us in order to embody radical welcome.

I’ve been watching the new Netflix series, Sweet Tooth, - well – I binged it, actually, it is that compelling, and I don’t think it was a coincidence that the series was released during Pride month. In the saga, the world has experienced “the Great Crumble” after a pandemic (sound familiar). As the pandemic erupts and builds, hybrid children (part animal, part human) begin to be born into a bewildered and panicked society. In the aftermath, a post-apocalyptic world, these non-binary children disrupt the status quo and

are blamed, hunted, and exploited for their difference. The series definitely shines a light on how we deal (or don't) with otherness that challenges what we consider conventional and how non-binary individuals are targeted and threatened, and sadly, beaten and killed.

We still have a long way to go (or swim, to continue our metaphor). Even as major corporations underwrite Pride events and urban bridges are aglow with rainbow neon this month, and an openly gay man and an openly transgender woman serves at the highest levels of our nation's government, laws to restrict the rights of LGBTQIA citizens are on the rise and our need to be strong straight allies is more pressing than ever.

No one should be expected to sacrifice their shimmering scales to be safe and affirmed for their inherent worth and dignity. Like the re-cast Rainbow Fish, who keeps what makes them special and unique while learning about humility and community without diminishing themselves for the comfort of others, we can stand with the Fabulous Catfish, who tells us: "There is room enough in the sea for each of us to be amazing in our own way." May we live the spirit of Pride, answer the call to love, and make room here at Beacon, this ever-growing and ever-learning, spiritually open and radically inclusive community we strive to be.

Shimmer on.

Blessed be. Blessed we and Amen

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Reflection

Alexei Besser-Gilbert, Beacon UU Office Manager

I've compared being queer to being a work of art before, and I think that still sums up pretty well how I feel about it.

I think if my identity was represented as a piece of art, I'd be a Frank Lloyd Wright house. I grew up in Chicago around Frank Lloyd Wright works, and they were always inspiring to me. I loved the geometric stylings, the stained glass details, his fascination with incorporating nature into his art- it feels..... Relatable, in a way. A weird thing to say about a building, I know. But I felt it.

My gender feels like the geometry of a Frank Lloyd Wright home. I think it's the most confusing part of my identity, at least in a cisgender space. And some people love my gender! Just like geometric building, some people think it's such a beautiful, artsy way of presentation. Some people would do anything to encounter one of those iconic houses- I grew up down the street from one that now is a popular wedding spot! Sure, there are people who disagree, think geometric building designs like that are weird or confusing or just plain not something they like, and that's fine! I can't stop anyone from disliking my identity or a Frank Lloyd Wright house. And, the good thing is- I don't have to hang out with people who are architecture snobs OR weirded out by my identity. I surround myself with people who see the beauty in my inherent structure, and have zero plans to demolish me just because I'm different.

My sexuality feels like seeing through stained glass. Viewing the beauty in everything, decorated with colors and sparkles, making even the most dull rooms have a spark of something. I've long identified with the broader term 'queer' for my identity, because I'm nonbinary and experience attraction less in gender and more in just. Broader strokes of beauty. I don't find myself attracted to a specific genre of man exclusively, I don't look for star signs or personality tests, I'm not seeking out muscles or lanky noodle folks, I'm waiting for a glow. My current partner feels like they're constantly drenched in a stained glass window with a rose design every time I get to interact with them. And I remember this sensation in the past, feeling like someone just is beautiful in so many tangible and intangible ways, and it was never about gender, or looks, or my family goals. It was just love. I think if my sexuality was a stained glass window, it would certainly be one Frank Lloyd Wright commissioned, art deco in inspiration, once again geometric and playing with colors and long and short pieces to make whatever it lays its light on sparkle even brighter.

I moved to Flagstaff to be closer to nature and the world. Since coming here, I've sat on rocks along the Urban Trail System and thought hard about aspects of myself, reassessed my relationship to queerness, and realized that the peace and calm of nature are exactly what I needed to understand myself. Frank Lloyd Wright was a genius at incorporating nature into architecture- especially for his residential homes, I can only imagine the calm of being surrounded by trees that brush your windows and almost seem to live with you, a rushing waterfall as you rest in bed at night.... It really does just sound like the perfect place to just Be. And that's what I've realized IS my relationship to queerness- I know I am queer. I know i fall on the spectrum of transgenderism and I know I experience all forms of attraction to all types of people. It should be *relatively* easy to figure this out.

But for me, labelling and identity nuances have always been difficult. Terms have come and gone in the queer community- words that were just words once are now teeming with such hate that you wouldn't dare say them in casual conversation, and there are new terms and understandings of old terms every day, it seems!

I identify my queerness with being around/near nature because I want to just Be. I want the sense of calm and 'whatever, it's fine, I don't need to worry too hard' that I get from camping or hiking or just existing in nature and the wildlife of the world. Just go with the flow! I have been in love with all kinds of people in the past, and I am deeply in love with someone now. I once dressed like a princess every day, I've dressed in a binder and purposefully trained my voice to be lower at other times. I can't invalidate these people I have been, I don't think they were wrong or false in their presentation, they are just a part of the ebb and flow of my queer experience.

Frank Lloyd Wright was a Unitarian Universalist, an artist, an architect, and an inspiration. His houses continue to be gorgeous and a time capsule of years long gone, all through the most beautiful lense. He is a worldwide spectacle of an architect.

I am a Unitarian Universalist, an artist, a filmmaker, and I have probably influenced people positively. My queerness is gorgeous, all my different phases and hyper specific identities are a time capsule of years of my life long gone, all through a lens that only I can claim, and I find beautiful.

I am a spectacle. I am proud.

June 13

Video – Corner of the sky – Prelude

Video This is Me – Musical Interlude

Video There is more love somewhere – (hymn with lyrics already included)

Come and go with me to that land – video (add lyrics)

Rainbow fish and a brief homily

Liturgy -

Other music