

Have you ever had a bus buddy? Someone whose full name you didn't even know, yet every day you made small talk about the weather, or the price of stamps going up, or the Red Sox. Maybe you wait at the bus stop with this person, or they work at the coffee cart you hit up mid-mornings during the week.

I had a buddy like that before seminary, back in Ohio. We talked at the bus stop in the cold Cleveland winter weather, talking to distract ourselves from the biting wind. We stuck to small talk- how the Cavaliers were doing, how grouchy our bus driver was, the price of gas going up for all those poor people who drove into work. Is it Friday yet? TGIF! That kind of thing- we kept it light. Untiluntil one day when I mentioned church. The day I said I hoped the weather cleared up before I had to drive to my meeting at church that evening.

And that is how I ended up explaining Unitarian Universalism on a frigid Monday morning, snow and sleet spinning around me, no bus in sight. My bus buddy seemed pretty interested in my patented "the past and present of Unitarian Universalism in 30 seconds" spiel. And when I said that we are not a Christian denomination he got really excited. "Excellent", he said, excellent, I have been looking for a church that didn't encourage all that Jesus talk about being kind to everyone. I don't want to be nice to everyone, some people are ridiculous. I don't want to be nice to dense people, I don't want to be nice to bigoted people. I just want to ignore them."

We might laugh at him, but I can't pretend I have never thought this. Wouldn't it be easier to just walk away, walk away from the people who say bigoted words, from the people who believe hateful stereotypes? To just ignore them?

Well, I had to let my bus buddy know that we kept the Jesus talk about being nice to everyone, that lots of religious traditions encouraged that. That in Unitarian Universalism we encourage 7 principles, and nearly every single one has to do with treating each other with respect. Our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, reminds us that we cannot just walk away from people we disagree with. They still have worth, they are still important.

Our second principle suggests compassion in human relations, which is the more active form of the first principle. Sure, I can acknowledge that people I don't agree with have worth, but treating them with compassion...that is a lot harder. That requires action, engagement. That means I can't walk away.

Did you notice the quote at the beginning of the bulletin? "Cultivate compassion. Work for peace, pray for others, ..until we are not **strangers** anymore." Until we are not strangers anymore. I could stomp away from narrow-minded people, that would be easier...but then we would still be strangers.

Staying in relationship with the person who makes offensive jokes, or votes for the candidate who makes your blood boil, is not easy. It would be simpler to walk away, punish them for their views by excluding them from your life. I know this from

experience, because I have done it. I have chosen what seemed like the higher road but was actually just the easier road. I turned away from people I disagreed with.

I was in college, at a tiny university tucked into a valley in rural southern Ohio, the foothills of the majestic Appalachian mountains. I was twenty or so, and I identified as a liberal Christian, a follower of the teachings of Jesus. I don't identify as a Christian any more, but I still value the words of the social justice agitator Jesus of Nazareth. The campus Christian group was large, and mostly conservative, or born-again, believers. I liked being the outlier, the hippie liberal, the radical. As the rust-colored autumn leaves fell on our green hills that fall, the campus minister approached me about starting a gay-straight alliance at the university. There were all of two out students, and they were not treated well. The year before a gay man transferred to a more urban school after being beaten up to the point of hospitalization after he came out. Perhaps a gay-straight alliance would bring some light into this dark part of campus life. As a well-known student in a long-term relationship with a man, it would be safe for me to be the public face of the alliance.

I agreed to the position, and immediately began to feel the social fallout. The campus Christian group had an emergency meeting and decided to formally lobby the school to disband the gay-straight alliance. Friends stopped speaking to me and I was no longer asked to lead worship services. I felt isolated and sad, but most of all I felt angry- angry and self-righteous. How could these people, who read the same Bible I did, think it was okay to act in a hateful way to a person that God had created? How could they not know the truth that I knew?

I turned away from the people who criticized the gay-straight alliance. I dismissed the people who didn't agree with me as small-minded, as backward, as not worthy of my time. I took what I thought was the high road, but ended up just being the easy road. I was only 20. I was, and am, a work in progress.

But what if I had stayed in relationship with them? What if the conversation hadn't ended with 'you're wrong and so you're out of my life.' You are bad and I am good and so I am finished with this friendship.

Because if I had stayed in conversation with my fellow students, I might have swayed them. Or at least planted a seed, a seed that spoke of a loving God, a benevolent universe, that would grow up over their fear of a judging and wrathful God. It would have been harder- much harder than just walking away. But staying in relationship would have meant acknowledging their inherent worth and dignity, and treating them with the same compassion I was demanding for the people in the gay-straight alliance. It would have meant cultivating compassion. But instead, we stayed strangers.

Staying in relationship would not have meant agreeing with them, or even tactfully agreeing to agree to disagree. It meant that the conversation would continue. It would acknowledge that we are all a work in progress, a changing and growing being. It would mean showing compassion, and working for peace, through a continued dialog...until we were not strangers anymore.

For the past ten years I have been fascinated with Buddhist theology, a theology that contributed to the second principle, our call to treat every one with compassion. Buddhist writer and clinical psychologist **Tara Brach** writes about this idea that we are all works in progress, and how this conflicts with our western upbringing. She says “In sharp contrast to our cultural conditioning as heirs of Adam and Eve, the Buddhist perspective holds that there is no such things as a sinful or evil person. When we harm ourselves or each other it is because we are ignorant.” To cultivate compassion, to stop being strangers, we need to dismiss the notion that people are either bad or good, and realize that we are all works in progress. We are not on different sides- that side in the bad camp, my side in the good camp- we are walking a road together, learning and growing together. The Buddhists know- there is not good side or evil side. There is room for all of us in Eden. cultivate compassion Work for peace, pray for others,until we are not **strangers** anymore.

Buddhist monk **Chogyam Trungpa** writes “The essence of human bravery is refusing to give up on anyone or anything- To see it each other as we are, and still feel that compassion.” Until we are not strangers anymore.

As we move into campaign season there will be fiery rhetoric on both sides, and positions will be taken, and lines will be drawn. And we might think, I am on the good side, and they are on the bad side. But life is never that simple. My spiritual

companions I ask you to remember- cultivate compassion, until we are not strangers anymore. We can disagree, we can debate, but we need to stay in relationship. We need to see each other with compassionate eyes, and love each other with hearts that know we are all works in progress.

My bus buddy never did visit my UU church- I had hoped he would, but after hearing that second principle- compassion in human relations- he decided to keep worshiping at St Mattress by the Springs. Because cultivating compassion is not easy- the high road often isn't. But when we walk together- cultivating compassion, working for peace, praying for others,...we will finally see that until we are not **strangers** anymore. That the seeds of understanding grow faster than those of division, and the fruit is a whole lot sweeter.

Let us pledge today to walk this road together, staying in relationship so that we are not strangers any more.