

Count Me In

Devorah Greenstein

Devorah Greenstein is Program Coordinator for the Unitarian Universalist Association's Office of Accessibility Concerns

Good morning,

I bring you greetings from the Unitarian Universalist Association. Thank you for inviting me. I love to visit vibrant congregations like yours, and there is a bonus when I get to visit an unfamiliar part of the country. Flying from Florida where I live, I flew over a wind farm -- 76 turbine towers. On my drive to Las Cruces, I could hardly keep my eyes on the road; I was so moved by the landscape I was driving through. I'm not used to seeing desert and the rocks...

And here you are in the midst of this awesome countryside -- the Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces, welcoming, as your website reads: families that come in all types and sizes -- and since people often don't take the time to read what is on their congregation's welcoming page, let me quote from it -- families that "express the diversity of the American experience -- singles, retired, young, old, and in between - single parents, partners with children, grandparents, physically challenged, straight and gay - we appreciate all of the gifts they bring to our religious community."

And you are a Welcoming Congregation. What a lovely invitation you offer: What a wonderful message. Can you remember what brought you and your family to this fellowship... can you touch, in your memory, the feeling of welcome and inclusion when people at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces extended their hands and hearts to you and your family.

It's a message I wish were more universal. All too often religious communities in our culture, in fact do not reach out with their hands and their hearts to welcome diversity, to welcome each person in their individuality and their differences the way you do.

Reading your website and thinking of your congregation, called to my mind a sentence in Barack Obama's acceptance speech -- a sentence that is still reverberating in my memory -- when he lifted up America's diversity with these inclusive words, "young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled..."

Because my work is on behalf of accessibility for people with disabilities, I especially rejoiced when he included disabled people in his speech -- because so often people with disabilities are excluded in word and in deed from our communal lives -- because of our society's attitudes and our buildings' architectural barriers.

In my work at the UUA, as a staff person in the Identity-based Ministries staff group and the Office of Accessibility Concerns, I work with congregations in the United States and Canada to help us in our Unitarian Universalist striving to be inclusive. Clearly, by your words and your deeds, the UU Church of Las Cruces welcomes inclusiveness and is eager to learn ways in which to become even more inclusive. So I would like to talk broadly about inclusion and exclusion -- and specifically about how we as Unitarian Universalists are called to inclusion of people with disabilities in our congregations.

The Reverend Eric Law is a theologian who speaks of ways in which our society includes and excludes people.

In one of his books, he said, as he was writing:

"... I realized the enormous number of words in the English language that we have available to describe exclusion: *omission, ostracism, segregation..., banishment, deletion... discrimination, elimination... exception..., rejection, removal...*

Then, seeking words for inclusion, Eric Law said:

"I looked in the thesaurus that was available in my computer's word processing software. I was shocked to find only three synonyms for inclusion: *insertion, addition, and enclosure...* I noticed these three words were all meant to be used to describe the inclusion of objects, not people. I then checked for synonyms of the verb form of inclusion.

I was happy to discover that there were more choices in the verb department, but again the choices were mostly verbs describing inclusion of objects – for example, *comprise, consist of, constitute, contain, entail, cover, insert, interject*, and so forth. When I eliminated those verbs that imply inclusion of objects only, I was left with *embody, embrace, encompass, incorporate, and involve*.

Let me repeat Eric Law's words of inclusion:

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These words symbolize what we Unitarian Universalists strive to do in our communities of faith. Our theology calls us to inclusion, from our first principle "We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person," to our last principle about the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

People with disabilities are our largest minority – disability is an equal opportunity experience – and yet disability is one of those things that people don't want to talk or think about. An activist leader has said that we are each of us one banana peel away from being a person with a disability. Yesterday afternoon I led a workshop and I had planned to show a short video that included several people with disabilities. We got involved in other conversations and I didn't show the DVD. One of the women we would have met in the video had been hanging curtains... she's now a wheelchair user, living with a pretty high level spinal cord injury.

If I remember correctly, she was standing on a stool not a step-stool – how many of us use chairs and stools instead of step-stools? She fell off the chair. Disability is an everyday experience, it is part of the natural order of things, if we live long enough we will all probably have a disability or two... disability is just a natural part of life, and universal design, some accommodations, along with a green mentality – well, we just really need to think about and create built environments that are accessible and inviting.

In my work to help UU congregations create communities that are welcoming to all people – my part being specifically about welcoming people with disabilities, I speak to many congregations, do a lot of workshops – and I used to say it is our first principle, that every person has inherent dignity and worth, that calls us to create accessible congregations. Every person, any person, individual by individual, whether coming into a UU congregation by rolling a wheelchair through a wide-easy-to-open door -- or being offered a Braille copy of "Singing the Living Tradition" – or being invited to sit in an area where people don't wear fragrances – that it

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I had been looking at accessibility, at inclusion, as a person-by-person process. And in part it certainly is true – in your community here in this building in Las Cruces, you may think of "Oh, we need a grab-bar in the restroom because so-and-so needs to hold on to something." Or so-and-so has environmental sensitivities so we need to encourage people to be fragrance-free on Sundays.

But it's more than the worth and dignity of each person. I have come to believe that it is more about a journey of our attitudes – a change in our awareness of what it takes to be an inclusive community. I have come to believe it is our seventh principle that is the key – that each of us here in this sanctuary, each one of us here, has come here to be part of an interdependent community.

A recent book by Thomas Reynolds, a Christian theologian and parent of a child with a disability, includes the story of how their child's less-than-perfect behavior in church led to ostracism and then to exclusion of their entire family from their congregation. Writing about the pain of separation, Reynolds wrote:

"Communities are a manifestation of the need to belong. And what are communities but extended matrices of interdependent relationships by which we belong to each other. While such belonging can become subject to ... exclusionary practices that judge others according to fears and prejudices ..., there remains a gentle but persistent moral tug... This tug stems from the basic fact that human beings are vulnerable beings who need each other...Without dependence upon one another; we cannot grow and develop the capacity for joy. We close up in fear. Love, however, opens us up. And this opening is established vis-à-vis relationships of mutual vulnerability in which people respect and take time to be with and for each other."

..."extended matrices of interdependent relationships" – that's a whole string of long words. But I'd like to read you a story that puts experience to those words. I'm going to read you part of a story about Katie, a UU teenager who lives in New Jersey. From the story her mother sent to me (and which will be appearing in the magazine "Exceptional Parent") Katie is a teenager with significant intellectual and behavioral disability.

In the big world, Katie doesn't count for much, but in her UU congregation she counts for a lot. Truly showing the spirit of our seventh principle, Katie was able to participate in her congregation's Coming of Age Ceremony. These are some of Katie's mother's words that describe how we Unitarian Universalists, relying on our principles and our belief in right relationship, can be inclusive and welcoming.

Picking up in the middle of the story, Katie's mother wrote that after years in Katie's childhood where her difficult behavior made it easier to leave her home with a babysitter on Sunday mornings...

"With time, maturity, a lot of effort on the part of her family and teachers, and some difficult years of learning how to control her own impulses, we were able to resume attending church together as a family.

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It was this recognition of how much she had grown as a member of this community that made me [ask if Katie could be part of the Coming of Age] class. [The leader's] reply was immediate and entirely supportive of the idea. ...

Before the first class, I met alone with the other youth, and told them a little about Katie. I explained that she speaks in two or three word sentences, doesn't know her letters or numbers, comprehends far more than she can say, and absolutely understands being welcomed and being included. I told them, "She won't be able to discuss UU values, but Katie will learn about being a UU by how those values are lived in the classroom."

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How we make manifest the interdependent web of which we are all a part – from the way we welcome people – reaching out a hand to a teenager like Katie – refraining from wearing perfume on Sunday mornings – having Orders of Service in large print ready for the unexpected visitor – from reducing your carbon foot print to building with universal design – you are the Las Cruces piece of our interdependent Unitarian Universalist web – extending your hands and hearts to every person – may you continue on this journey.

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..."extended matrices of interdependent relationships" – that's a whole string of long words. But I'd like to read you a story that puts experience to those words. I'm going to read you part of a story about Katie, a UU teenager who lives in New Jersey. From the story her mother sent to me (and which will be appearing in the magazine "Exceptional Parent") Katie is a teenager with significant intellectual and behavioral disability.

In the big world, Katie doesn't count for much, but in her UU congregation she counts for a lot. Truly showing the spirit of our seventh principle, Katie was able to participate in her congregation's Coming of Age Ceremony. These are some of Katie's mother's words that describe how we Unitarian Universalists, relying on our principles and our belief in right relationship, can be inclusive and welcoming.

Picking up in the middle of the story, Katie's mother wrote that after years in Katie's childhood where her difficult behavior made it easier to leave her home with a babysitter on Sunday mornings...

"With time, maturity, a lot of effort on the part of her family and teachers, and some difficult years of learning how to control her own impulses, we were able to resume attending church together as a family.

We might have been content to go on like that indefinitely, but one Sunday I was talking with someone before the service started, and when I turned around Katie was no longer standing near me. She was across the room with Charlie, the head usher, being given a stack of programs and instructions about how to hand them out to people as they entered through the doors. I sat down in a pew, holding my breath and watching as Katie smiled and carefully handed each person a program... and how people smiled in return and casually thanked her.

These are ordinary interactions for most of us, but for Katie, this was a new level of engagement with the world. ... In time... she started helping with the collection, walking down the aisle, passing out the plate, and bringing it to the office at the back of the church. Out of those experiences, there emerged in Katie a sense of confidence, comfort, and belonging in this space and among these people.

It was this recognition of how much she had grown as a member of this community that made me [ask if Katie could be part of the Coming of Age] class. [The leader's] reply was immediate and entirely supportive of the idea. ...

Before the first class, I met alone with the other youth, and told them a little about Katie. I explained that she speaks in two or three word sentences, doesn't know her letters or numbers, comprehends far more than she can say, and absolutely understands being welcomed and being included. I told them, "She won't be able to discuss UU values, but Katie will learn about being a UU by how those values are lived in the classroom."

I asked them if they had any questions, and one of the girls replied simply, "I'm glad Katie is going to be part of this class; she *should* be part of this class." Perhaps you have to have raised a child who is so immediately perceived as "different" from her peers to appreciate the gratefulness with which I received those words, spoken so matter-of factly, as if it were an obvious and unremarkable truth.

...Katie's mother continues the story with many details but I will skip to the end...

... From the three hour rehearsal on Saturday, to the rehearsal dinner that evening, to the entire Sunday morning service in front of over a hundred people, Katie was engaged, and focused, and eager to participate. It wasn't just that she "behaved;" it was that she *understood* and wanted to be part of this special event, sitting with her friends and doing all the things they were doing. Facing the congregation, she joyfully looked at us and waved. When she needed a touch of reassurance, it was one of her classmates who took her hand.

...

As parents, it is what we long for, Katie's mother writes --other people coming to know and cherish our daughter for the uniquely wonderful person she is, and the gifts she brings to their lives. ...

We had succeeded in finding a way to genuinely honor this movement into adulthood for someone ... whose dreams and yearnings for connections were utterly familiar to all of us in the sanctuary that day, regardless of age. And in the process we learned that the loving welcome she received was the same welcome we all seek as we enter into community, entrusting our gifts and vulnerabilities into the hands of others, and meeting together the lifelong challenge of "coming of age."

That is how Katie's mother ends her story. But of course the story doesn't end. It continues, and is replicated – in every UU congregation where we live out our beliefs that we are woven together in interdependent communities.

And so I am delighted that you invited me here to talk about accessibility – and some of the ways of making a building accessible and at the same time making a building greener. As I said, I have come to believe that a congregation's journey to accessibility is just a part of its journey and growth as a congregation. There are striking parallels between a congregation's journey of accessibility and a congregation's journey of becoming more green, in part because both journeys ask people to change their habits and attitudes. Also, being "green" is very similar to being "accessible" – welcoming to the environment, welcoming to people.

How we make manifest the interdependent web of which we are all a part – from the way we welcome people – reaching out a hand to a teenager like Katie – refraining from wearing perfume on Sunday mornings – having Orders of Service in large print ready for the unexpected visitor – from reducing your carbon foot print to building with universal design – you are the Las Cruces piece of our interdependent Unitarian Universalist web – extending your hands and hearts to every person – may you continue on this journey.

May it be so.