

Spirit Crossing

It was a River of Grass auction item that determined the topic for this morning's service. This year's "sermon on a topic of your choice" was purchased by Gayle Giese. The topic she gave me was "Mental Illness" and my journey through the process of writing this sermon has been both enlightening and humbling. "Neuropsychiatric disorders are the leading cause of disability in the world--more than heart disease, cancer, or injuries. In 1990, the U.S. Congress established the first full week of October as Mental Illness Awareness Week (MIAW)."¹ I am pleased to honor the first day of Mental Health Awareness Week with you today, and to share my thoughts on how we as UUs can make a difference in the lives of those who struggle with mental health conditions.

I chose the title Spirit Crossing because I want us to focus on the part of us that holds the internal wellspring of the spirit of love and compassion. I chose it because I believe that it creates, in this space, a compassionate and loving community. I chose it because I believe that spirit crossing is how we come face to face with our humanity - in the empty spaces - between us, and within us.

The human species thrives in community. Yet, there are spaces between us - all of us. Some are caused by disconnects that come and go quickly – unnoticed pauses within brief moments in time. And sometimes these spaces stick around, trapped by any number of circumstances. They are the spaces that are created when people don't understand, when they don't agree with one another, and when they withdraw from one another (whether through discomfort, fear, embarrassment, hurt or anger). They are all around us - these spaces between us - made wider each time one of us backs away, turns away, runs away, disengages, ignores, avoids, or closes up. They are reinforced during those awkward moments when we simply don't know what to say or don't know what to do. Spaces that can at times seem so wide that we feel detached, vulnerable, misunderstood, and alone - even in a crowd.

¹ from NAMI ADVOCATE magazine, Fall 2012, p. 6

Think of a time when you have felt detached – maybe from your family or your friends - or a time when you have felt detached from your community. Maybe you felt like an outsider, maybe you felt left out, like you didn't belong, like nobody noticed you, or really cared. Maybe you lost a loved one, and your grief is making you feel isolated and alone, or you might be struggling with an illness or disability, which makes you feel that people are not in touch with what you are going through. These spaces between us and in us are nothing new – and they are here to stay; you see, they are a part of our human condition. They are the reason that we need spirit crossing. They are the reason we come here to River of Grass. They are the spaces where our spiritual development is challenged, strengthened, and deepened. And we need each other to go there. This is not an individual journey. There is nothing to be gained by entering into these spaces alone. We need each other to meet us there. We need each other to take us there.

There are so many ways that I can look at myself, my environment, and my behaviors, and say I am one of those people who stays comfortably between the lines. There are so many ways that I meet the expectations of society... and yet, there are so many ways that I don't.

I cross the street at crosswalks. I wait until the orange flashing "Do not Cross" hand turns into a little walking figure with a 20 second countdown. When I go to a restaurant, I will sit at the table the host takes me to. If I have to go to the bathroom, and I enter an establishment where the restroom sign says, "For paying customers only", I feel obligated to either leave or buy something. If I were to make a list of all the places throughout my lifetime that I truly believed that I fit in, aligned with the norms, or met expectations, my list would be surprisingly short.

I was a little girl who hated dolls and loved catching frogs. I was an adolescent girl who liked girls, not boys. I was an unmarried teen mom. After my free spirited childhood waned, and my adolescence sent me into a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual tailspin, I found myself spending a lot of my young adult life trying desperately to fit within the norms and meet society's expectations of me – and in doing so found myself painfully uncomfortable in my own

skin. Then, when I turned it all around and focused on being comfortable with myself instead – I made a lot of people around me uncomfortable. It seemed like a no win situation. I either hurt inside, or I hurt those I loved. Or so I thought at the time. So, as a young adult I lived inside the lines, and existed outside the lines - in that space between me, and everybody else. Navigating my everyday life was complicated, and that space between the real me and everybody else seemed so very wide.

I didn't want to make people uncomfortable, so there were many conversations I never joined. And there were the many jokes I tried to laugh at, while feeling them cut deep under my skin.

I have since come to realize that it's not about me, and it never really has been. The truth is, every one of us, in some way, falls outside the lines of normal that have been drawn by someone else, and sometimes even those drawn by themselves. The truth is, people are uncomfortable with a lot of things – not just my things. Usually it's things they don't understand, things they can't relate to, or things they are afraid of.

The lines of normal are drawn in so many ways throughout our lives, creating frames that do nothing more than separate us, label us, alienate and isolate us from one another. These lines of normal are drawn from many angles. For example, they may attempt to define physical norms where things such as body piercings and tattoos fall outside the lines; or they may attempt to define genetic norms where physical deformities or unique features fall outside the lines; they may be gender-based defining marriage as "Between one man and one woman", or cultural lines that suddenly appear when you hear someone say, for example, "If they are going to live in this country they should speak English", or "Why can't they at least wear normal clothes". And then there are the lines that are drawn around health and wellness, causing those suffering from terminal illness, obesity, addiction, and autism or mental illness such as depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia to be stigmatized and marginalized by society. The margins of normal are made with powerful pens, drawing lines in our lives that continually

affect not just how we see each other, but how we treat each other - the same lines that, behind the scenes, become the frameworks of our lives.

We all live within frameworks - some are created automatically by things we are exposed to as we grow, develop, and learn, and some are impressed upon us by our parents, our schools, our places of worship, or our friends. Some are cultural, some are spiritual, some are generational, some are educational, some are physical, and some are psychological. We use these frameworks to help us make sense of our world and navigate life. They set our expectations of ourselves and of others. Our 7 UU Principles are a framework that we all share here today – they define our covenant to one another. But they are far from the only frameworks we carry as individuals. Our individual frameworks, built over a lifetime, create the boundaries of our comfort zones, and it is these comfort zones that create the spaces between us, separating us one from another.

Where are your comfort zones? You have to look for them, because they don't often hang around in your conscious mind – they exist quietly in the background and you have to really pay attention to discover them, and more importantly, to stretch them. Here is an easy way to discover and identify your comfort zones. Just pay close attention to the things that make you uncomfortable, anxious, or resistant. Especially in the areas I mentioned earlier: physical, gender-based, cultural, or medical. Then ask yourself, “Why am I uncomfortable?”, “Why am I resistant?”, and finally, “Is this an area where I need to stretch so that the true spirit of who I strive to be can help me step out of my own framework and meet someone who needs my support in the empty space between us?” That can be a pretty tall order.

Sometimes it's easier to start with the little things and then work your way up to the deeper and more profound. Earlier, I mentioned that I use the crosswalk. The crosswalk is one of my comfort zones. I'm not exactly sure where this framework solidified in my psyche, or why I am so set on following it, but crossing the street anywhere else is just plain uncomfortable for me.

Not for my wife Esther, though. She will cross the street anywhere she wants to, without a second thought, as long as she has determined it to be safe. To her it simply makes no sense to walk all the way to the crosswalk at the corner if it's perfectly safe to cross from right where she is in the middle of the block. When it comes to crossing streets, there is space between us.

There is no common ground here - unless one of us steps beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone. And this is where the magic of spirit crossing happens. Sometimes I cross with Esther, and sometimes she crosses with me. In both cases, it brings us together and keeps us from crossing the street alone. I still feel uncomfortable when I cross with her, resisting that invisible subconscious pull toward the crosswalk, because I have stretched to embrace that there are times when it is perfectly safe to cross the street in the middle of the block... and when I insist that we walk to the corner crosswalk and she agrees, Esther might still rolls her eyes or sigh, but not as often, because she too has stretched to appreciate my framework. It is the spirit of right relations that help us to stretch and grow. It is in the space between us that our spirits cross over and reinforce our commitment to, and our covenant with, one another.

Now, we can use this simple example to guide us when we are faced with the more difficult space challenges, whether with each other or with others. We can ask why, and do what we can to step beyond our own comfort zones and stretch. Stretching is good exercise for body, mind, and spirit.

Tell me if this sounds familiar: "I enjoy being in a community of like-minded people." Yes?

This is a phrase that I am sure most of us have either said or related to, myself included. But I find it interesting how it stands in direct contrast to this often quoted saying drawn from our Unitarian roots: "We need not think alike to love alike."

"I enjoy being in a community of like-minded people."

"We need not think alike to love alike."

Hmmm... reflect on that for just a moment... The dichotomy of the inclusive nature of UUism at it's best!

"We need not think alike to love alike," are words that reflect the Unitarian side of our faith tradition. In Transylvania in the sixteenth century, Unitarianism was seen as a way to fill the spaces created by the many differing religious views that divided the people of that time and that place. Look at how these words prioritize the heart, and the loving spirit of an inclusive community. "We need not think alike to love alike." ("we" means everyone). This simple philosophy captures the essence of spirit crossing because it transcends all the challenges created by our conscious minds, and keeps us grounded in covenant and right relations. It puts people first, and love above all. It affirms the first principle of our faith tradition – the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Putting **people first**, and love above all is a lesson offered by many spiritual teachers throughout history and in the present day where we as Unitarian Universalists continue to gather around the world to address human rights and freedoms by "Standing on the side of love."

Put the person first, and love above all. We also see this in the field of medicine, where it is encouraged that when dealing with patients, one should use words that **refer to the person first** rather than that person's condition. Doing this helps one to see the whole person and not just the condition. Here is how it works. We would not say, for example, "He or she is a cancer patient", rather we would say, "He or she is battling cancer". We would not say, "He or she is schizophrenic", rather we would say, "He or she is struggling with schizophrenia".

We can apply person first in any situation where we are not on common ground with someone else – instead of saying, "He is a widower", we would say, "He has lost his wife or significant other". Instead of saying, "He or she is a homeless person", we would say, "He or she is living in the streets, or has no place to live." Whether it is religion, politics, socio-economics, physical, or even mental health - we need to meet each other in the space between and see not only what the person is going through, but the whole person as well, erasing the lines that try to

frame our focus around the conditions thus minimizing the wholeness of the person involved. To see clearly that they are, and will always be, a person first. Conditions are secondary. No matter what community of people you find yourself to be a part of, you will encounter opportunities to meet others in the spaces between you and them. There will be those that stretch us more than others. The often overlooked, or avoided, spaces are those that separate us from people who are battling mental illness in various forms including manic depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, social anxiety disorder, and schizophrenia, to name a few. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) one in five families have a family member who suffers from severe mental illness. It is found among all classes, ethnic, socioeconomic, and national groups and is found all over the world. These diseases often strike youth in their most productive years and they can, and do, respond to proper treatment and social support. The term mental illness refers to a group of brain function disorders that cause severe disturbances in thinking, feeling, acting and relating. There is no effective prevention at this time. These conditions are biological in nature, the same as diabetes, heart and lung disease, or neurological disorders, and those suffering from these conditions do the best they can to fit in and live “normal” lives. Often, their behaviors are unpredictable and will often fall outside the lines of what is considered appropriate. What is important to understand is that people with these conditions cannot always control their emotions, reactions or behaviors. They cannot just “snap out of it” and act in a manner in which others in their families or communities would feel more comfortable. Because of this, people struggling with these mental conditions are often avoided or ignored. For many of us, meeting them in these spaces is particularly difficult because we feel awkward, unprepared, and uncomfortable. Avoidance is easier, and compassion at a distance seems to be all we can muster. But these opportunities to live our covenant, invite us to step beyond our comfort zones and see that person of inherent worth and dignity - someone who deserves our love and support - someone who needs our us to greet them in the space between us with our loving hearts rather than our logical minds. We don't have to fully understand in order to connect, rather, connection comes from the heart and a sincere desire to explore beyond the limited understanding we bring into the space. Spirit Crossing challenges us to stretch ourselves using a person first view to meet them where

they are with our hearts guided by compassion. It is up to us to intentionally enter these spaces with no expectations. To bring into these spaces the simple understanding that these disorders are not developmental, but organic brain problems anchored in the biology and chemistry of the human body - disorders that are faced by those among us who, through no choice of their own, are either born with or develop these conditions at some point in their lives. And that often times, these conditions are debilitating, and effective treatment, though possible, is a moving target to hit – a target that their families aim at every day with hope, and faith, and courage. Effective treatment comes with its own challenges, often taking care of symptoms such as hallucinations, anxiety, and delusions, but doing nothing for withdrawal, loss of concentration, or poor judgment. Medicine is not magic. The magic begins when we bring compassion, support, and love into the spaces, easing the burden of their journey to wholeness.

42% of persons with severe mental illness live with family members. The rest are divided among the homeless, prisons, hospitals, and for those families who can afford the phenomenal high cost, full time residential care facilities.

It is up to us to embrace these individuals, and their family members, the same way we would if it were our own son, or daughter, or spouse - to offer the same empathy, encouragement and support that we would for a person battling cancer. Person first. It is up to us to affirm, as individuals and as a community, that they are worthy of our attention, our love, and our support as they struggle to find steady ground to stand upon and a community they can learn to trust. The fourth Principle of our faith tradition, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning guides us in this journey of understanding what lies beyond our comfort zones, and our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person keeps our hearts open in covenant and right relations when we enter into that space. And, most importantly, we remember that each time we meet them where they are, in that space between us, that their condition is never what defines them. We affirm that there is a whole person struggling with mental illness who is no different than ourselves – let me repeat that, they are no different than ourselves. It is only the obstacles they face that differ. They are, and will always be, a person with feelings, interests, talents, likes and dislikes - a person that has plans, and hopes,

and dreams - a person that can feel pain and joy, pride and embarrassment, frustration and elation, disappointment and accomplishment, defeat and victory – a person who can feel isolation and inclusion, and looks to us for the things we all hunger for – acceptance and love.

People with mental illness, like other people of faith, look to their faith community for compassion and understanding. The community must work to shift from the use of the more traditional “condition first” language that evokes pity, and other negative images, and instead models a “person first” language that embraces and engages with these members by reaching out "with fully accepting love". This requires opening channels of communication with persons with mental illness or with their care-givers. Wherever those channels may be, we meet them there. How? We take the time to find out their interests, hobbies, or recent activities, and we meet them where they are. Principle three grounds us in acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. So I challenge you today to become explorers of the empty spaces between you and those who fall outside your comfort zones. Ask about the meaning behind tattoos with sincere interest, and then move beyond to see what else make that person, that person. Learn some conversational phrases in another language, try tweeting, listen to the music of our youth, and don't turn away from or avoid those who struggle with physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or mental illness. Don't give up on the awkward conversations and interactions; don't turn away from the challenges – face them – letting your spirit guide you. Enter the empty spaces with no expectations, open to the embrace of a shared humanity. For it is this “person first and love above all” that will continue to connect us in life's bittersweet wholeness. We are a web of life with lines and with spaces. Let spirit crossing make us all more whole.

May it be so in this place, and every place. Amen, and blessed be.