

Changing Minds and Hearts

Rev. Frieda Gillespie

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I've attended two UU Conversations and have found them to be lively and thought provoking. Although these are not sequential conversations they certainly reflect the responses to the changes that are going on in our society and government. The partisan divide has become so intense that it has even infected the supreme court nominations making it impossible for people to trust that objectivity and fairness will prevail. The question came up and comes up regularly these days, 'how do we communicate with those whose viewpoint about decisions being made differ so fundamentally from ours?' 'How do we change their minds'?

I think the answer to this question is 'We cannot change another person's mind, especially if we enter into the conversation with that motivation.' In the early 2000's gay marriage was just a hope and a slim one at that. Gay and lesbian people were up against strong conservative religious beliefs and many young gay people were being painfully rejected by their families. I met a gay couple who made it their ministry to let straight people get to know them as people. They volunteered to host the annual neighborhood party and opened their home to neighbors who had hardly spoken to them other than to say, hello. People came to the party out of curiosity and once inside, looked through their kitchen cabinets and were remarking at how their dishes were just like their own, which shows you how deep the disconnect was for people. That personal connection was needed to make inroads

into people's fears. Without these simple commonalities, people are too afraid to even approach a gay person.

There is a woman we've gotten to know through sports in Framingham that moved here a few years ago from Utah. The husband was 6th generation Mormon and she was an enthusiastic convert. He was asked to speak to a niece of hers about the church and try to convince her of its value and veracity. She had been reading books that were meant to expose the church's questionable beginnings and found it hard to accept their beliefs. He is an analyst for the FBI and read the books that the niece was reading so he could speak to them but found them to be compelling. He was quickly disillusioned, and they decided to leave the church! A quite remarkable story. He was influenced greatly by his work to respond to factual evidence and that is what motivated him. An important side note was that as soon as they made the decision to leave the church, the many church friends that interacted with the family almost daily stopped speaking to them altogether. If they needed any extra assurance that they were doing the right thing, that was it.

Having been involved with Scientology in the early '90's, I can understand what happens to people when they become immersed in an ideology. I was not involved long enough to lose all perspective but long enough to dedicate my time and energy to it. What brought me out of it was reading an expose that echoed and clarified some of the doubts I had felt from the beginning and showed me the seriousness of the kind of brainwashing that they do. When you are part of a group like that or any even loosely affiliated group where beliefs are intensely held, you tend to associate with others who share those beliefs and confirm your own bias toward them. You are part of the 'soup' so to speak and it becomes hard to see outside of it. It is even harder to emotionally want to be outside of it. It can be really scary to stand

alone. Those who've experienced the close affiliation with a group of any kind, are very reluctant to let it go.

I'm convinced we all live in a soup that makes us feel happy and comfortable with our particular views and the meanings we give to our lives. This is not a bad thing. One could do a lot worse than be in the soup of Unitarian Universalism or even liberal Christianity or any number of open-minded groups of people.

When I adopted my daughter in 2000, she was 9.5. I went with her to a party for foster families and at one point we sat next to an African American family. Tealeesha, my daughter, had grown up in a very racist part of Texas, and was gesturing subtly for us to move away from the black family and I asked her point blank if she didn't like black people. I told her that I did like them and she was young enough to accept that pretty readily. If I had gone along with what was clearly her upbringing, she would have kept those attitudes. Early on after adopting Tealeesha, before we moved to Framingham, MA, we visited some of her birth family. I was very uncomfortable being in her father's house which was not much more than a shack and was filthy by my standards. I wanted to be respectful but was a little bit disgusted by what I saw and I didn't feel safe. Her father believed that Armageddon was coming soon. He was surprised when I didn't agree. I think the only religion he'd ever known was hellfire and brimstone.

To be an influence in someone's thinking and feeling we'd have to be a regular positive force in their life. There is an old saying, 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' Ideas that are based on fear and superstition aren't countered by reason but by an equally strong emotion. Someone, maybe one of you, told me to watch the first episode of "Queer Eye" which is a show where 5 young

gay men give a makeover to a straight person. Each of the gay men have their own talents: hair styling, fashion, interior design, landscaping etc. So, it's really a complete makeover. I watched this episode and found it to be really touching. The gay men went into the experience expecting to care about their client. He was kind of a grizzly man in his sixties who had lost so much joy in his life, that he just sat at home in an old dirty Barcalounger and watched tv and drank beer. In spite of this, these guys went into the experience expecting to really like this man. There were no negative comments or rolling eyes. And they were very respectful of his sensibilities. For example, they didn't shave off his shaggy beard but shaped it so that it looked smart and neat. The clothes they chose fit his casual lifestyle and they showed him where he could shop for more. They did throw away his recliner, but also got him two new ones that were smaller and nicer so he could sit with a friend. There had been a woman friend in the picture but she had stopped seeing him because of his passivity. He was really inspired by the changes they helped him make, and he invited his friend over for dinner. It turned out she was happy to reconnect and was very pleasantly surprised by his new energy. It wasn't until after I'd watched the whole show, that I realized how loving the whole episode was. I have no doubt that if they had entered the experience with judgment and preconceived ideas of how this man should be, it would have been a whole different experience.

We'd like to believe that if we just made the right argument people would come around to our way of thinking. That only works if everyone is in the same soup. People outside are not even listening to our arguments. In our UU Conversation this past week, someone relayed a story about a man who was raised as a white supremacist. His whole family subscribed to the ideology. That was his 'soup' and his community. When he went to college he left his home and family and

got to know other people who by rights he should have hated. He liked the Jewish, black and muslim people he met and had classes with. He started to realize that he was wrong--the white supremacist rhetoric is wrong and he began to question his whole upbringing. Now he works as a counselor to people who have been raised in the white supremacist movement and have doubts. He helps them clarify their doubts and have the courage to separate themselves from their old attitudes. It is a hard thing to do because in separating from this movement, they are separating from people that they have loved and admired. They can be ostracized from family and former friends. Not many people have the courage to pay that price.

Above all, we have to remember that we are all human beings and at our core we are all worthy of dignity and respect as our first principle says. Within that reality is the commonality that we need to communicate to those who seem different than us. May we find the heart to reach out to them.