

A Firm Stance and an Open Heart

**A sermon preached by Rev. Christine Robinson
and Carmen Emerson, Ministerial Intern
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A Firm Stance and an Open Heart: Part I

Carmen Emerson, Ministerial Intern

Good morning. My name is Carmen Emerson, and I am thrilled to be spending this year with you as your intern minister.

I first became a member of a Unitarian Universalist church in 1990, when I joined the First Unitarian Church of Orlando, Florida. As is true for many UUs, I feel like I have been a Unitarian Universalist for my entire life—it just took me a while to find us.

I was raised in the Deep South, in rural Arkansas, in a small farming community located on the Mississippi River, just about fifty miles south of Memphis, Tennessee. We visited many different churches during my childhood, the most conservative being a charismatic Pentecostal church, the most liberal being the Methodists. There were many churches in between, including the Baptists, the Missionary Baptists, and the Church of Christ. My sister and I especially liked the Church of Christ because we got to leave the house early on Sunday mornings—without our parents—and ride the church bus to Sunday School. My parents liked that, too.

Even at a young age I struggled with religion in my conservative southern town, and I struggled most around issues of racism. I *heard* what people said on Sunday mornings, but I witnessed their behavior from Monday to Saturday, and there was a disconnect. This disconnect was present at home, too.

When I was seven years old we lived with my grandparents. My grandfather worked every day with a black man named Buster. Buster was middle-aged, much younger than my grandfather, and therefore he could still do much of the physical work that my grandfather was no longer able to do. I could not remember a time when Buster was not a part of our lives, and I thought he was a part of our family.

One night at suppertime, my grandmother fixed a plate for my grandfather and for Buster. My grandfather pulled a chair up to the table, and Buster took his plate outside, sat on the back porch steps, and began to eat. Well, I was mystified by this. “Why is Buster eating outside?” I asked. No one answered. “Why is Buster eating outside?” I asked again. My grandmother, my beloved grandmother, said, “That’s just the way things are. Now hush and eat your supper.”

What a gut-wrenching moment. It was the first moment that I doubted the person I loved and trusted more than anyone else in the world. I was too young to tease apart the tangled strands of history, culture, and fear—all of it impacted by Dr. King’s death only fifty miles away from us—but something within me shifted because I knew that there needed to be more of an answer than “that’s just the way things are.” Since that moment I have never been satisfied with “that’s just the way things are.” That’s why I *loved* discovering Unitarian Universalism almost twenty years ago—*no one*, no UU I have ever met is the kind of person who would be satisfied with “that’s just the way things are,” no matter the issue of oppression or injustice. For UUs, “that’s just the way

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things are” is a launching pad, not a landing pad, and I am hopeful that the other churches in my hometown have come to realize that apathy in the face of injustice is against their gospel, too.

After discovering Unitarian Universalism and becoming a member of a UU church I could not wait for my first trip home to enlighten my wrong-headed family about their conservative political and religious views: “Let me tell you all the things that you need to change!” They would *have* to listen to me, because I was *right*, and I had the authority of a church behind me now to prove it!

But here’s the thing about being “right” with friends and families . . . it comes with a cost. The cost may be as small and temporary as hurt and tender feelings that eventually are mended, or the cost may be as large as total estrangement. I know, because I have experienced this with my father, who cannot fathom or accept my liberal faith tradition, or my liberal and progressive politics. Rejection is painful, but so is betraying one’s own integrity.

As people of faith, what do we do when our values and personal integrity rub hard against the values and integrity of friends and family whom we love and trust? Is it a time of sacrifice? Do we sacrifice our guiding values and personal integrity, or do we sacrifice the relationship? If we truly love and respect another person, how do we ask *that* person to sacrifice his or her own values and personal integrity on our behalf?

Fortunately I have a very loving and forgiving family, and after my first attempts at evangelism and conversion, I realized the error of my ways. Inspiration works much better than coercion! We hung in there, together, my family and me, and I’ve learned that *understanding* is a much better approach than *shaming*. Humility is also a very effective peace offering!

One of my spiritual teachers, The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, wrote these guiding words that I try to remember when I’m leaning toward judgment and coercion instead of understanding and inspiration: “Meaningful and creative experience shared between people can be more compelling than all of the ideas, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them; and if such experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a sufficient duration of time, then any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated.”

We have made progress, my family and me. They loved me through my stages of zealotry, and I have learned to talk with them about my faith and my values in ways that convey what these things mean to me, why they are so important to me, without criticizing or shaming my family. They have witnessed changes in me, for the better, and they are curious about the source of these changes—curious about my religious and political values, rather than being dismissive. *Here’s the thing: we love and we trust each other, and we have been willing to stay in the conversation.* Progress has been made, and with continued openness, humility, curiosity, and commitment to meaningful and creative experiences together, progress and deepened understanding will continue, for all of us.

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A Firm Stance and an Open Heart: Part II

Rev. Christine Robinson

Reading: "The Long View" by Oscar Romero

I spent a day last week at a UUA-sponsored media training, led by a UU layperson who is a media consultant in Washington, D.C., and who volunteers massive amounts of time with the UUA when big media issues come up. So, for instance, when my colleague Deborah Haffner was invited to be on the Bill O'Riley show to defend age-appropriate sex education for young children, Fred Garcia helped her to prepare. He showed us a clip of the show and let us see his principles in action.

I've never watched Bill O'Riley, and I really was shocked at what an extreme form of entertainment he engages in. Shocked and saddened for our nation and our public discourse. What a terrible model of communication! And I was overcome with admiration for my colleague, who actually did a pretty good job in the circumstance; she got Bill to agree on almost everything and agree to disagree on a final point. I have a feeling that that's better than most liberals do on that show!

Luckily, most encounters with the media are less adversarial, and slow talkers like me who like to complete their sentences uninterrupted have a chance if we are well prepared, and that's what Fred Garcia set out to do. Well prepared is, of course, the key. You have to know what you want to say. But that's not enough. You also have to understand what the media needs to create a story, like conflict and human interest, and then you have to stay on track with your story, while they are trying to meet the reporter's needs for even more conflict and human interest. It took, I found in the practice sessions, quite a bit of preparation and discipline.

Most conversations we have with people who have different views than ours will be between two amateur conversationalists, but the principles are really very similar. First, you have to be prepared and know what you think and why and be willing to share that (firm stance). Second, you have to have a care for the other person, what they need and what their interests are (open heart). These two principles are fundamental to all relationships: marriages, parenting, colleagues, friends. A good relationship is a series of interactions between two people who have, as in the title of the sermon, a firm stance and an open heart, who know what they want and who want an authentic, back and forth interaction that benefits both people.

Now each of these things is very possible, sometimes even easy, by themselves. It's very easy to be extremely firm about what you believe, all by yourself. It's Christine arguing with the windshield of her car; she's brilliant, piercing, damning, and 100 percent strong! She is a rock, an island, and she always gets in the last word. She knows what she thinks; she's prepared her three talking points. Bill O'Riley, here we come! (You should laugh uproariously at that idea.)

With a real conversation partner, Christine had better have another set of values at the ready, or she won't have a conversation partner for long. It's not enough to have a firm grip on who you are and what you want, you also have to have an open heart for the other person. That's what Carmen discovered on her visits home after her values and commitments had changed so much. She discovered that she didn't just care about parading her newly found values, important as they were to her. She *also* cared about maintaining her relationships. So did her family.

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Now it is not so hard to keep an open heart for others if you are willing to agree with them on every point. People will love you for this, at least for a while, but, having left yourself behind, you'll be resentful and angry. Ironically, even those who seemed to demand that you be just like them will find it hard to relate to you if you have lost your self in your desire for conformity. For everyone's good, in the end, you have to do both—firm stance, open heart. Know what you believe, say so in a caring way. Stand up for what you think, leave room for the other person to do the same.

So the mother tells the child, "I'm the mom, and I've decided. I can see you don't like it. Do you want to tell me about that?" That's a mom who has a firm stance, presumably on a matter that moms really should be deciding for children that age. But she didn't just say, "I've decided, now you just put a smile on your face." That would be requiring her child to deny his feelings on the matter. Her sympathy to his unhappiness and willingness to listen is her open heart.

Now I've been hard on Bill O'Riley and the style of his show this morning, and I'm not going to go back on my dislike of it. But I do want to tell you that one way Haffner came off well in the argument was that she was respectful of O'Riley and even at one point said very pleasantly, "Oh, come on, Bill, I know that we agree about some of this!" It was a turning point in the interview. That's about all the open heart one can afford to have on the Bill O'Riley show, but it scored a point with Bill and with the audience. He himself is so verbally combative that we can certainly put him in the "firm stance" category, but he also respectfully referred to my colleague as "reverend." If he had been personally abusive to her, he would have lost his ground. Even in the most extreme situations, then, "firm stance and open heart" is the best policy.

An open heart is one thing that many politically liberal UUs have lost toward all conservatives, even the milder-mannered ones, and that is hurting us. Most UUs are politically liberal; that's always been the case. But there are plenty of politically conservative Americans who don't happen to believe in orthodox doctrines and who seek a church like ours. They appreciate their religious freedom here so much that they tolerate being in the minority, politically. Naturally, they are very sensitive to the closed-hearted political liberalism of those around them. It comes across, not so much in direct conversation, when most of us would be carefully polite, but in offhand scornful superiority and in the assumption that UUs all agree about political issues. Fact is, we don't. Our blindness to that fact drives good religious liberals away and it reduces our opportunities to learn from each other and engage in conversations that are eye-opening for both parties.

During the same several decades that religion has become a much less polarizing topic in society, when most Americans have come to believe that all religions have something important to say, we have become more polarized about politics and less able to keep an open heart to the other side, and less able to see the humanity in those who disagree with us. Because we are all unpracticed and closed-hearted, we start doing politics by shouting match, or even worse, by tactics of disruption, as we saw at the health care town hall meetings last summer. What a sad commentary on America! We have turned into a nation of fanatics who can only tout their own position over and over and can't keep an open mind or heart to those who differ. It's a terrible loss.

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So how do you maintain that firm stance and open heart, which are both so necessary to thoughtful conversation? I have three hints to share with you. First, know yourself; second, shore up the set of skills your are weak at; and third, reduce anxiety.

The first thing is to know yourself. When it comes to “firm stance” and “open heart,” most of us are *much* better at one of those things than the other. So if you have to get after yourself for being a doormat, you’re stronger at the open heart. If you have to get after yourself for driving friends away with your strong opinions, you are clearly better with the firm stance. Just recognizing your strengths and weaknesses is helpful.

Secondly, we have to shore up the side of the equation that is weaker. Notice I didn’t say back down on the side that is stronger. That strength is so important and it is not necessary to temper it. Rather, develop the opposite as a strength, too.

My own challenge is to keep an open heart and some flexibility in my thinking when I’m in a conversation. My challenge is to remember that there’s a universe of truth and also that I really do care about the relationship I have with the person I’m talking to. The slash and burn, “You’re wrong and here’s why,” well, I discovered a long time ago that you don’t even make converts that way, much less friends. I need to be a good listener to find out what the other person really cares about. I need to stay open to the possibility that they have some good points, or at least needs and fears, that I should be taking seriously. I need to care enough about them and about my own values that I don’t insult them or speak as if they are despicable human beings.

If I was a different kind of person, the kind who is so attuned to what others think and feel, who is always inclined just to “go along,” I’d have another kind of work cut out for me. Honoring my focus on the relationship, I’d have to realize that I have to be a self and take a stand in order to be true to myself and even in order to have good relationships. I have to practice standing up for what I think, and get experience in disagreeing while staying in the relationship. It takes practice and good experience to come to see that relationships are created by strong people who care about each other.

Thirdly, we have the best and most productive conversations if we can contain our anxiety and act in ways that help our partner contain theirs. Anxiety is like static on a phone line; it makes everything harder. We reduce our own anxiety by remembering that our truths are partial, that we are only a small part of the arc of justice, that we are workers for good, not makers of good. So we can have a conversation without the anxious need for our partner to instantly come over to our way of seeing things. We help the other person reduce their anxiety by following the rules of polite conversation. When people know that they will get to say their piece and have a fair hearing, they are less combative and more clear, more able to keep an open heart themselves.

It’s a matter, in the end, of remembering that beyond “right” and “wrong” and “good” and “bad” and “my way” and “your way,” there’s a wide and gracious field for relationship, the open hearted and respectful meeting of two human beings. It’s a matter of remembering that those relationships are really important, not only for our well-being, but for the furtherance of that arc of justice that takes so long to come to fulfillment.

The extremely polarized conversation about healthcare is taking place these days on every bus, in every workplace, on every blog. Anxiety is running very high; it’s a very high stakes conversation. Instead of running the other way, give a try at taking your stand while staying open to the other. Hear their needs and fears with sympathy. See if

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you can get them, by sheer dint of politeness, to hear yours. Those are the conversations that create wisdom and feed democracy. Let's just take a moment of reflection to call into our mind's eye and our heart's warmth how much we care about our nation and its people and its future. And resolve to do what we can do—firm stance, open heart—to make us strong. Amen.