

Welcoming Ways
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A Sermon Given to the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, March 4, 2018

This month of March, our worship theme is *WELCOME*. Our themes for February, March, April and May represent the four goals of our Developmental Ministry: *Identity, Welcome, Structure* and *Worship*. In your OOS this morning, the pink handout gives our Goal statements and the Key Outcomes that will represent the fulfillment of each of those Goals. The Welcome Goal is the second one. Let's read it together:

2U is a welcoming and engaging congregation for newcomers and members.

There are some important ideas here. We want to be welcoming for people here – not newcomers alone, but for everyone here. And we want not just to welcome people, but to **engage** them in the identity and purpose of this congregation, and of our Unitarian Universalist faith generally. Again, this dream of engagement is for people who are already members, too. We want to engage and immerse people in a ***lifelong journey*** of spiritual meaning and growth, individually and as a Unitarian Universalist community.

What does it mean to be a people of Welcome? A people of Welcoming **WAYS**?

A story is always a good place to start!

Generosity Bends The Road

A story from Sudan as told by Faye Mogenson

A man named Attay lived far off in the countryside. He lived there with his wife, his seven sons and their wives, his nine daughters and their husbands, plus sixty-three of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren – some of whom were married. The family on its own was an entire village. Life was good for Attay and all his offspring. They were able to grow or hunt the food they needed, water in the river was plentiful, and there were trees and wood enough to build and heat their homes. Now and then, they traveled the long road into the city to trade some of the animals they raised or food they grew for goods like sugar or ready-made cloth. But mostly, they stayed home and enjoyed life there. The village was situated next to the river and far from the caravan road. It was very rare for visitors to come by.

But one day, not far from the village, a caravan of a dozen merchants lost their way. Days passed as the men wandered about. The forest was dense, and they couldn't tell where to go. Sometimes they circled back to where they'd been before. They were growing very worried.

Finally, very early one morning, the merchants awoke to the sound of roosters crowing. It was at some distance and like music to their ears!

They saddled up their camels and loaded their belongings as quickly as they could. By the time they mounted, they could hear the faint sound of dogs barking. More music!

They moved toward the sounds; by sunrise, they could see faint lines of smoke rising into the sky. It could only be a village!

They urged their camels on.

When at last they arrived in the village, they were met by several young men. The men were smiling and welcomed them warmly. They guided the merchants into a yard where they tied the camels and where the women of the village offered them grass, grain, and water. The merchants then were invited into another yard and welcomed by an elderly man—none other than Attay. He joined twelve young men of his family in offering *karama* to each of the merchants.

In Sudan, *karama* is the traditional offering given as thanks to Allah for a wedding celebration, the birth of a child, or the return of a loved one who has been gone a long time. It is also the traditional offering to a guest. In the old days, as in this story, *karama* was a sheep or goat that was slaughtered to feed the guest, or for Allah to feed the poor. Today it is still often a sheep or goat, but it might also be some other kind of food like cooked millet or sorghum.

Attay and his family offered *karama* to each and every one of the twelve merchants, in the form of twelve sheep. According to tradition, the merchants each jumped over their *karama* goats. After that, the feasting and celebrations began. The villagers and their guests shared food and stories and songs, praising and glorifying Allah and the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him).

The villagers made the merchants feel at home and welcomed them to stay for several days until they and their camels were well rested. When at last the merchants were ready to resume their journey, they offered Attay gifts. He refused.

The name Attay means giver, and it was his honor and privilege to be able to host the merchants. He invited them to return again and bring other guests with them.

The merchants were appreciative of the fine treatment they had received from Attay and his family. As they continued their travels, they spoke highly of the experience. They remembered the standing invitation, and within the year, they returned with more men. Their reception was as warm and as generous as it had been the first time. After that, stories of Attay and his family spread like fire in dry grass. Anyone traveling along the caravan road turned off to visit. Year after year, more and more people came. Finally, the stream of visitors was so frequent that the route to Attay's village became more visible and distinct than the main caravan road. The former route gradually vanished. And the path to Attay's village was clear and distinct.

The village of Attay came to be the most important station along the caravan route. All who stopped by were served with the same generosity as the first visiting merchants. All the food and any supplies they needed, a room to sleep, and care for their camels was provided at no cost. Attay came to be called Awaq Addarib – **the one who bent the road**. His story is shared to this day in Sudan. The Sudanese continue to offer this same kind of generosity to strangers.

Some of our songs and readings this morning have been about the ideas of journeying and of finding home. In our Call to Worship and our first hymn, we invited those travelling to come and sit by our fire here so that we can share stories of who we are and what means and matters most to us. No matter **whoever you are**, you are welcome to come and share your story with us, in this, our religious home.

To be welcoming is to make our Circle wider, as the words on the cover of the Order of Service say. And in our second hymn, we claim that making the Circle wide means it can never be broken. Our religious community

here can remain whole in our shared identity and purpose, not matter how many new and different people come to us.

This is partly because our faith is not built on shared beliefs, but on promises about how we commit to live with and find meaning with one another and all beings on the planet and with the planet itself. Our Circle is open to all who are willing to be part of the covenants – the promises – we make to each other. Our foundational covenant as Unitarian Universalists is our Seven Principles that we commit to living here and everywhere in our lives. Found in your OOS and in the front of the hymnal.

So we don't constrict ourselves or those who might come to us according to religious belief. This means our Circle is spiritually limitless.

So, how do we make our Circle, our religious home, wider – that is, more expansive and inclusive and engaging – by the way we Welcome people? That's what I will be talking about all month, in some form or fashion. But today, I want to focus on one particular way we make our circle wide, a way claimed in our Story.

This weekend marks the start of our annual Stewardship campaign. This is when we re-commit our time and our talents and our gifts and our money to the work of this church for the coming year. We use the word stewardship for this process. But what does that somewhat odd and old-fashioned word even mean?

The word comes from Old English words meaning to guard and care for the hall or home. ***To guard and care for the hall or home.*** And it has come to mean more generally: ***the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.***

Clearly this is not just about the physical structure here, but about our spiritual home in all ways. Not just the structure, but also all of us, ***the people.*** We are here mostly to care for and love one another, as well as the building. To encourage one another to spiritual growth. To build a better community of justice, equity and compassion.

Our religious faith of Unitarian Universalism is a legacy and a treasure that we have been given by those who went before us. As is this building and our grounds. Our faith and our hall have been entrusted to our care, for now and into the future.

And we need money to thrive as a religious community. And the money we give, the time we spend here, our talents that we bring, are all part of the care, the stewardship, that we have and that we share. For one another, for the Seven Principles and the meaning of our Unitarian Universalist faith and for our future and legacy as a religious community – for our children and all those yet to come. It is our ***care*** that we show in all ways that is central to our ability let everyone out there who needs what we are offering – the freedom of our faith – to let them know we are here and to welcome them deeply and truly.

So, to get back to our story from Sudan. It is Attay and his family's ***generosity*** that bent the road towards their home. Their love and care for the wayfaring strangers who came to them changed the paths in that part of the world. They had been far off the beaten caravan path – and it is their generosity that brought the road to them.

So the idea for us here is that it is **OUR** generosity – of money and our gifts and skills and everything else – which bends the road out there towards **this** home, our religious home. Our generosity not only to the care of the hall and to the dear folks already here, but our generosity of support and care for those who are new and those who are yet to come. The folks who are thirsting for what we offer here and do not know we are here.

Being truly welcoming, truly generous, doesn't mean having folks come here and expecting them to be like us. Being truly welcoming means being willing to have **them** change **us** by their very presence. To have them show **us** new ways of loving and caring and finding meaning together here in this hall. And that kind of willingness is our **generosity of spirit**. And it is a critical way of welcoming people here.

It is through our generosity of spirit **and** of our money and of our time and talents that we can bend the road towards **this** home, **our** spiritual home. To draw our Circle wide and wider still.

Because, that's why we're here. That's our purpose. To live and preach and teach and share our Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism right here in Omaha. And to do that in ways that are loving and caring and full of joy and compassion. And in ways that are generously Welcoming to all those we encounter. To those who are already here and those yet to come – wayfaring strangers, and our children's children.

So, during this Stewardship season, I invite you to give generously in all the ways that you can to **bend the road** to this wonderful religious home. Our money, and the gift of our presence to one another, these are all really gifts **to ourselves**, to support this beloved Unitarian Universalist community

So may it be, blessed be.