

**“Welcoming The Stranger”**  
Sermon, Sunday, April 25, 2010  
Second Congregational Society UU, Concord, NH  
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*[During the music preceding the sermon, a “stranger” with a mask (cardboard box with face) enters the sanctuary and tentatively looks around and eventually takes a seat in the pews.]*

There is a stranger among us. We don't know what this stranger wants. We don't know why the stranger came, what the stranger will do, what the stranger will say if we talk to him - or is it a her? We don't know. At this point, all we know is our own reaction to the appearance of this stranger. What is our reaction to this stranger?

*[wait a moment, then pick a few that seem to be in the room...]*

Perhaps suspicion, fear, curiosity, annoyance, irritation, impatience, amusement, bewilderment, anxiety, ...

The appearance of the stranger means that someone has broken our routine, someone has disrupted our plans, someone is threatening the safety of our lives, perhaps not literally, but the safety that comes with the comfort of dealing with the known, the predictable, the “normal” way of doing things. Yet the stranger is here and won't disappear by wishing the stranger away and won't go away by looking the other direction.

Who are you stranger? We want to ask, but that's getting ahead of ourselves. At this point the only question we can answer is: How am I reacting to this stranger? What do I feel? What do I think as I notice this stranger?

And as we examine our reactions to the stranger we can begin to ask, why? Why do I have these reactions? What about the stranger makes me react the way I do? Is my reaction about the stranger or is my reaction about my own fears, hopes, anxieties, and the culture that shapes these emotions? Is my reaction based on who the stranger is or is my reaction about who I am?

How exhilarating to think, the stranger, just by showing up, has taught me something important about myself. The stranger holds up a mirror, a mirror that reflects the issues that are on my mind and heart, a mirror that shows the culture I take for granted, and a mirror that reveals a little more about who I am.

The potential is there, the invitation is there to look at that mirror right at the very beginning - if we give ourselves permission, if we are willing to go there. And if we are willing to go there, we can begin our interaction with the stranger from a perspective of gratitude. Gratitude for teaching us about ourselves, about our culture, about where we are at in our lives. Thank you stranger.

Of course, our other reactions are still there, the suspicion, the fear, the curiosity, the annoyance, but they are now intertwined with a sprinkling of gratitude, with a hint of warmth, perhaps, toward the intrusion.

At this point the stranger may disappear. We may never see the stranger again, never get our questions about the stranger answered. And yet our lives may already be enriched.

*[The Stranger walks out.]*

Thank you stranger and good bye. Come again, please.

Just three and a half months ago, I was a complete stranger in this sanctuary. I did not know any of you and none of you had even heard of me. A month and a half later, I had met a remarkable group of people, people you had entrusted the task to go search for a new settled minister. We exchanged packets, we talked on the phone, but as I arrived for pre-candidating week in February, my heart was pounding and I must admit I was afraid.

Who will I meet? What will they think of me? What if they don't like me? What if they think I am too this, or too that? What if they don't want me to come back?

A week ago, I came back. Again, I was nervous - especially when last Sunday the line of people streaming into this sanctuary seemed without end. Glancing in from the hallway I could feel a palpable sense of anticipation - within myself and within the room. What will they think of me? How will I feel in front of them? I am a stranger here. This is their sanctuary.

Run while you still can, I thought, for just a very fleeting moment. Yet as I stepped into this space, as I looked into your faces, as we sang, told stories, and worshipped together, I was overcome by the feeling of being exactly where I wanted to be.

Seven potlucks, a garden clean-up, and over twenty-five group meetings later - not that I was counting - something miraculous has happened. You opened your individual and collective arms and welcomed me, the stranger, to the warmth of your community and the richness of life at Concord Unitarian Universalist church.

Our relationship has been transformed and my fears have receded to the back of my consciousness. The same fears are still there, but now surrounded and held in check by the overwhelming outpouring of welcome - and outstanding food - I got to experience. Thank you.

I know I am not the only one who's got to experience this welcome. Most of you were strangers in this place at one point and experienced a similar welcome, though perhaps less compressed into a single week.

And I know your willingness to welcome strangers does not stop at the door of this church. Many of you have hosted strangers, shared your meals with strangers, helped strangers get oriented around town or the garden plots right outside this church. Quite a few of you have even adopted a stranger and made him, or her, a member of your own family. What an inspiration for us all.

This transformation of relationships we offer to strangers is at the core of what it means to give peace a chance and justice an opening. Without dialog, without peaceful communication we are left with only two alternatives when we encounter the stranger: we can retreat into isolation and built walls and fences or we can engage in conflict, violence, and war. Neither option is viable much less desirable in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As Ryszard Kapuscinski puts it: "We live in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world, not because there are more of these societies and cultures than before, but because they are speaking ever louder, ever more independently and decisively demanding to be accepted and acknowledged, and to be given a place at the table."

Without our willingness to make the stranger feel welcome and feel grateful for what the stranger can offer us we are stuck in a culture that cannot sustain the reality of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

Yet, for every stranger we welcome, for every stranger we greet with a smile there are many more we meet with suspicion and with the hope that they will leave us alone. For every stranger we welcome because they seem, well, nice and friendly we disregard a slue of others.

Stranger is not equal to stranger. We prefer to welcome strangers who seem to welcome us. We prefer to welcome strangers who we anticipate will fit in, perhaps even become friends. At least I do. And I feel good about opening those doors and transforming a relationship with a stranger into a relationship of friendship.

Yet, the real challenge is to welcome the stranger that takes courage to meet. The real challenge is to welcome the stranger even if that means you risk humiliation, disappointment, and rejection. The real challenge is to welcome the stranger even if that means you risk getting hurt.

Now the stranger is no longer merely the person we have never met. Now the stranger could be anyone who is different, who challenges our beliefs and values, and who makes us nervous, anxious, irritated, afraid.

A friend of mine told me about her brother. Her brother had a brain tumor removed at the age of 38. Now, ten years later, he is still not the same. He says things and does things my friend cannot understand. Her brother has become a stranger to her. It is very hard for her to accept this changed person. His own kids are unable to accept him. He needs her. It takes courage for her to be with him and welcome him.

For several years I lived across from a house that was described as a crack house by other neighbors. I saw people coming in and out of the house, I saw kids playing in the front yard, yet I never knocked on the door and introduced myself. I lacked the courage to welcome them.

Some of us are afraid to talk to Junior High students because they frighten us. Some of us are afraid to talk with anyone over 60 because they scare us. Some of us are afraid to talk to anyone on the bus, or on the street because we are worried about crime. Some of us are afraid to talk to someone who disagrees with us politically because we don't trust ourselves to remain welcoming.

There are good reasons to be afraid of what is different. There are good reasons to be fearful of the unknown. And thanks to evolution we can rely on our instincts to wave the flag of caution, and forcefully so, as we face what is unfamiliar. No animals, including the human species, would survive for long if they did not pay attention to that flag, to those instincts.

If your parents don't eat this food, you better not eat it either. If your parents can't fly, don't try and jump down that cliff. If you are a mole, don't get too close to the fox, if you are a fox, don't get too close to the coyote, if you are a coyote don't get too close to the wolf and so on.

Yet none of us would be here if that's all we paid attention to. There would be no humans walking and talking, there would be no people living in America, there would be no democracy, no right to vote, no French Fries. None of that would be here if it were not for

those who defied their fears, who tried what was unknown, and who overcame their suspicion of strangers and their different ways of doing things.

Fear is embedded in who we are, but so is risk taking. That's the paradox of our instincts and of our culture. We have it both in our DNA, in who we are as biological beings and as cultural beings. We will always tap into both. The question is not whether we should be cautious or whether we should take risks. The question is always, when will we be cautious and when will we take risks and to what end. We have a choice about how to balance those two competing instincts and cultural guidelines.

We talk to our kids of stranger danger and yet we teach them the Golden Rule, to treat others the way we want to be treated. I don't like to be treated as if I am dangerous. The two become a paradox.

We tell our kids to avoid drugs because they can hurt us, yet most of us don't think twice about putting them into our automobiles, that kill 250 of us every single day in the United States alone. Some risks we find acceptable, others we don't, but we have a choice. We have a choice on how to invest our willingness to take risks. We have a choice about what to do with our courage. We have a choice to what end we put our courage. And we have a choice to what end we encourage our young to put their sizable willingness to take risks.

Two years ago I went on a civil rights tour through Alabama and Mississippi. As we passed through Selma, Meridian, Birmingham, Montgomery I was struck by the incredible courage shown by so many of the civil rights workers as they fought for a society that would welcome all people regardless of the color of their skin. Would I have been willing to take those risks? Would I have gotten on a bus to join the Freedom Riders knowing full well there was a good chance of getting hurt?

I have no clear answer, but I know that I have willingly risked my own life before. Yet I recognize that there is a huge difference between the risk the Freedom Riders took and the risk I took despite what might have been fairly similar odds. They risked their lives for some greater purpose, to bring justice to the world through dialog. I risked my life for, well, I am not sure. I was trying to climb a mountain in Alaska, I was exploring my physical and mental limits, I lusted after adventure - but all these objectives were primarily self-focused. No greater good resulted from my risk taking - other than the gratitude of my friends for saving their lives, which is not insignificant for my relationship with them, but of marginal relevance in the grand scheme of things.

I am no longer willing to take similar risks while mountaineering and I recognize that I have become more risk averse in other aspects of my life. So I wish I had "spent" my willingness to risk my life on a greater cause, on some action with the potential for social transformation. But I did not and my responsibilities for the well being of my nuclear family have given me sufficient reason to accept this reality for the time being. I have redrawn the balance between caution and courage.

Yet I keep climbing into that automobile, I keep biking, running, I continue to take risks. We all do. What if we stayed away from our cars for a day (or whatever else we do that is risky) and "spend" the risk we have now saved on welcoming a stranger? And I don't mean the friendly kind, but rather the stranger that takes courage to approach and welcome.

Go visit a neighborhood you consider scary and talk to an old person, a young person, a mother, a police officer. Find out their story. If football players scare you, go talk to them. If religious fundamentalists scare you, go talk to them. If atheists scare you, go talk to them.

Your likelihood of getting hurt is a lot lower than the chance you will get hurt when you get back into your car the day after.

If we are not willing to pay a price, how are we ever going to transform the world? At the beginning we sang "Come, come whoever you are." Do we mean that? Do we mean that at the personal level? Isn't that too risky? We speak of love and appeal to its power to guide us. But love is just a concept until we use it to overcome fear, until we let it guide us in our attempt to find the courage to overcome whatever keeps us separate.

Ryszard Kapuscinski writes that "the myths of many tribes and peoples include a belief that only we are human, the members of our clan, our society, and that Others [the Strangers] are subhuman, or not human at all."

"How different" he continues, "is the image of the same Other [...] during the time when gods could take on human form and behave like people. For in those days no one could be sure if an approaching traveler, nomad or stranger were a person or a god resembling a person. This uncertainty, this intriguing ambivalence is one of the sources of the culture of hospitality, which recommends showing every form of kindness to the newcomer."

I don't believe in the existence of these gods. Yet I love and respect the idea that we should always treat the stranger as if he or she may be divine and hold the key to the salvation of our future.

So next time there is a stranger among us let us remember this possibility. And next time we fear a stranger, let us remember this possibility. Then next time we are the stranger may we live up to our divine potential and bring transformation to our hosts.

May it be so. Amen.