Last Wednesday evening, twenty-five participants gathered downstairs, first for interfaith worship and then a panel discussion on Islamophobia, xenophobia, fear, and creating safety, especially for Muslims, who are under attack by those like Donald Trump, intolerant politicians, and fearful, ignorant fellow citizens.

About half of those gathered were from our congregation; others from across the city.

The program was organized by the New Sanctuary Coalition, which does so much on behalf of reform of immigration laws and assisting families and individuals facing unjust detention and deportation, and I am glad that we were supportive hosts, as we have been on many occasions for spirited events.

The evening did not go as planned. Publicity had been late in arriving, thus a belated announcement last Sunday and email. That evening we were to begin together by participating in Muslim prayer led by an imam… invited to join in evening Salah, the ritual prayer performed five times a day by practicing Muslims.

For me, that was a powerful, spirit-filled opportunity – to bring diverse faiths into a shared moment…. An act of hospitality to embrace.

Chairs were along the edge of the Assembly Hall allowing plenty of open space. Blankets were at hand to spread on the floor, there for us to stand and kneel upon, in lieu of prayer rugs. A NY News 1 reporter had her video camera set up, ready to record the gathering and then do some interviews.

The appointed hour came. The imam was delayed. We waited. We received word he was on his way with several colleagues. We waited some more. Again, we heard he was nearby….

After about twenty minutes, we began with the brief words I had prepared with readings from different traditions, about welcoming the stranger; respecting and listening to one another and how we are not alone: We have each other. We need each other, and others are in need of us.

Surely, now the imam would be with us. But he was not. So we transitioned to the panel discussion with several advocates and activists and a sheikh, a Muslim professor. We would join in Muslim prayer when the imam arrived.
I was disappointed, as I am sure everyone else was, not with the panelists’ good words, but that we had not been able to share Salah.

So what do you do when things don’t go as expected? When frustrated? One path is... to let go... let go of that expectation of Muslim prayer, be present to the moment, to the speakers, and to one another. The social climate toward Muslims, after all, is increasingly poisoned; ... our values as a country undermined... hate speech spreading.... Matters worthy of shared reflection.

Not everything was lost with the change in program.

Then something gracious, transforming happened. One of those present, a Muslim young man, offered, agreed with the convener of the meeting to lead us in Salah.

He explained very briefly that he would offer the call to prayer... prepare himself... and then lead us. We then took the blankets, spread them across the floor; faced eastward toward Mecca, and followed his movements that included
  o standing still with arms folded across one’s stomach/chest;
  o bowing and touching one’s knees;
  o then kneeling with one’s forehead and nose equally touching the blanket - the ground. His prayers were in Arabic with moments of silence and... all this was repeated four times.

I experienced a peacefulness... a shared presence... an intimation of the power of this ritual which daily unites Muslims around the world in their devotion.

Then we regathered in chairs and discussion followed... sharing of anger and fears and hopes and sharing the conviction that we need one another. And each of us has ways to respond to the ugliness of the proposal to ban Muslims, the ugliness of dividing us from our neighbors, and the ugliness of dishonoring our best selves and the best of our nation.

Muslim, Christian, Jew, Unitarian Universalist – connected in community, as we should be tangibly in that place.... A glimpse of the world as it could and should be.

All this was especially timely with the recent divisiveness offered by Mr. Trump whose ugly words, in my mind and that of others, give leaders of ISIS what they want. His despicable proposal is another recruiting tool for terrorists, adding to anti-American sentiment, as a wannabee-President rejects our national values of respect for others and for religious diversity.

NY News 1 that evening broadcast a segment on this interfaith witness to solidarity and to resistance to hate speech.
As part of our heritage here at Community and as Unitarian Universalists, we celebrate the “unities and universals” as lifted up by Clarence Skinner almost 100 years ago. Skinner was Dean of Crane Theological Seminary at Tufts University, founded by the Universalists, and he along with our Minister, John Haynes Holmes, was promoting Universal Religion and the Community Church movement beginning in 1919.

Universalism out of which we have evolved was an emerging denomination in the late 1700s. It emphasized that God is a God of Love, and that such a God would not send anyone to an eternal hell. It repudiated John Calvin’s doctrine of a whimsical, tyrannical God, who saved only a few, the “elect”, while punishing the vast majority for what was deemed to be humanity’s – yours and my – inherent depravity. Our founders embraced Universal Salvation: If God is a God of Love, and surely that is true they affirmed, then all would be restored to God in heaven (in that premodern dualism).

Both early Universalists and early Unitarians reacted against those Calvinist doctrines of Original Sin, and instead emphasized the sacred potential within each person, as well as rejecting hell-fire and damnation with an embrace of God as Love.

Universalism as World Religion, or Universal Religion, emerged opening its doors to wider spheres. By 1919, its Clarence Skinner offered “… Principles of the Future Religion” and would come to speak about “the unities and universals” that unite humankind, “manifested or to be manifested in economic, social, political, racial and scientific” as well as religious “Universalism.” (G. H. Williams, 84)

It was a vision of evolutionary progress, perhaps slow in its fulfillment, but unmistakably underway. … “a universalism found in the highest development of the world religions… (with) Christianity… an important step … a universalism (that) is a … [more inclusive] development than Christianity” summoning the best from every tradition. (85)

In this spirit, our congregation in the 1950s pioneered in summoning the best from every tradition, and in celebrating religious and spiritual insight from many traditions. In doing so, we have had lasting impact on American Unitarianism.

This morning, we have included the Lighting of the Hanukkah Menorah, and more ancient nature traditions of Hanging the Greens adapted by Christians at Advent, followed by Christmas next week, and then the emergent festival of Kwanzaa. Hinduism’s Festival of Lights, Divali, was a focus one Sunday last month.

I personally return frequently to Islam’s understanding of forgetfulness in its teaching about original sin (not really a focus or doctrine as in too much of Christianity). We humans, created out of the elements of stars, we who share the sparkle of cosmic creativity… we too often forget our kinship and sacredness with all of creation and with one another: Forgetfulness of the basic relatedness we have.
I guided our including these banners of many faiths in our Hall of Worship in 1987 as but a sample of sources of inspiration. They are only a portion of our conviction that the sacred has appeared to many peoples, at many times throughout human history, in many cultures. And just as important, we have ongoing revelations and access to the holy, every day.

Theologians call it continuous revelation, not a fixed, immutable one-time event. And why would God, the holy, the sacred, the Creative Process simply stop? Our fabulous human imagination, myth-making, meaning-making, symbol-making... how fortunate we are to bless this world.

I love the comment of one of our long time members. She left the religion of her childhood for us because the spiritual ceiling there, where she had grown up, was too low, cramped, and stifling.

There is much more that I could say, and just as we are humble in our bold declaration of trying to build the Beloved Community, we approach other religious traditions with a measure of humility, even as we taste teachings that enliven our souls and seek to learn from them, as some of us did last Wednesday with Muslim Salah.

I feel fortunate to have grown up as a Unitarian Universalist. Fifty plus years ago, a popular Sunday School curriculum for us as young teenagers was titled, “The Church Across the Street.” We visited Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, and Episcopalian churches, plus a Quaker meeting, as well as the local Jewish Temple. One week we would learn about the history and teachings of one group; then next week we would visit, and usually get to speak with a Minister, priest or rabbi; then the third week discuss our experiences. In these times, Sunday School students also visit mosques and Hindu and Buddhist Temples.

We are invited to understand the diverse paths of those who worship in different ways, even as we see a common thread of weekly gatherings... for what?

Gathering as a community to give thanks for life’s gifts, to find healing, hopeful moments in word and song; to find new lessons (or ancient wisdom) for the living of our days; to understand with Dr. King and Gandhi and Jesus that each of us can be great because each of us can serve; that spiritual life includes mindfulness and compassion and justice... reiterated by diverse, different and sometimes similar rituals.

The unities and universals were and still are an anchor for me.

I was invited to see universal values: compassion, kindness, service to others, respect for differences, thoughtful dialogue, gratitude, and appreciative awareness.
Our faith tradition affirms “Deeds not Creeds” – “welcoming each to the service of all”; understanding that “we need not think alike to love alike.”

Shall rigid, dogmatic thinking (or, stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith as James Fowler has called it in his book STAGES OF FAITH) wear us down and wear us out?

Or shall the human questing, curious spirit – that glory – help make ours a more tolerant and compassionate world? There is little inevitable about progress, so I suspect most of us are not arrogant about the challenges ahead, yet we remain as audacious as Ken Patton in our reading… (while chastened by human foibles that sometimes seem to match our nobility).

Amid forgetfulness and distraction away from our shared humanity, and despite the narcissism and idolatry of self that seduces some of us, there is this magnificent, bold, daring vision… of honoring religious wisdom wherever it is found, of deep respect for diverse teachings … that we can embrace the unities and universals. We can grow our souls and find salvation – find honor and character – in this world.

With Ken Patton, we say, “Religion in its core is what Jesus and Buddha and Lao-tzu and all the other sages have declared it to be: loving one another….

“We can say the words: This is one world: you are one humanity. Live therefore in peace, and till the garden of the earth, and make your days and the years of your children a glad time upon the earth.”

With Mohammad and so many others, in the face of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and those who pander to our lesser selves, we can say, "No one is a true believer unless you desire for your neighbor that which you desire for yourself."

From the personal to the communal, I think also of poet, novelist, and songwriter Naomi Shihab Nye. She writes about “Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal.”

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”

Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

“Help,” said the flight service person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.”
I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic].... The minute she heard any words she knew – however poorly used – she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said no, no, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let’s call him and tell him. We called her son and I spoke with him in English.

I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then, telling me about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers – non-alcoholic – and the two little girls waiting for our flight, one African-American, one Mexican-American – ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves; such an old-country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

[Naomi Shihab Nye concludes,] This can still happen, anywhere. Not everything is lost.
In these troubling and troubled times of so much ugliness and division, we too can turn the stranger into a friend, sometimes even pray together, show hospitality to all… to all…. and, of course rebuke and confront the dangerous, and continue the struggle for justice.

We invite each other to hone the radiance of our humanity with

- grateful spirits,
- a servant faith,
- big hearts,
- open minds, and
- helping hands,

as we embrace the unities and universals.

In these deeds, “partialisms, broken fragments of life, are lifted into a vast and profound oneness. Our littleness becomes stretched to cosmic greatness.”

READINGS


Today a universal and international world religion is no more an impossibility than is the United Nations in the political world. It will have small beginnings, but those beginnings are already starting to emerge. It will be the work of the liberals in the various cultures, for internationalism and universalism are liberal sentiments and disciplines. Orthodox and conservative religions are isolationist, or else rely upon religious imperialism and colonialism. Liberalism, like science, is tolerant and inclusive in its outreach. It seeks to receive teaching, not to proselytize. It seeks to join, not conquer and submerge others….

Religion in its core is what Jesus and Buddha and Lao-tzu and all the other sages have declared it to be: loving one another…

We can say the words: This is one world: you are one humanity. Live therefore in peace, and till the garden of the earth, and make your days and the years of your children a glad time upon the earth.
There are two alternatives, and only two, before us. First, which is unlikely, is that we unscramble our modern interdependent culture, returning to separate and isolationist lives. If we went back to the village state of existence, then we might be partialists to our hearts’ content. Such a world would not demand greatness.

The other alternative is to so expand our spiritual powers that we vastly increase the range of our understanding and sympathy. There is no middle way. It is greatness – universalism – or perish.

There is no experience which gives to (us)… so compelling a universalism as this radical religious insight into the unities and universals….

To me the highest type of religious experience is that which gives… [us] a sense of unity and universality. Most of our life is spent in narrow segments. Our horizon is hemmed about by kitchen walls, office desks, narrow prejudices of race, class or creed. In religion, these partialisms, broken fragments of life, are lifted into a vast and profound oneness. Our littleness becomes stretched to cosmic greatness.”