

Come Out Come Out
delivered Oct 7, 2007
Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth, ME

Beloved poet Mary Oliver recently released a new collection of poems called *Thirst*. In many of them she speaks to God as an intimate, like Rumi, like Hafiz, like Theresa of Avila, like Mira. In some of them she mourns the loss of another beloved: Molly Malone Cook, her life partner who died in 2005. This is the first of the poems: (Thirst, 2006, Beacon Press, p.1)

Messenger

(poem quoted in its entirety, ending thus:

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is that we live forever.)

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What are we telling, over and over? What do we have courage to tell?

We have a million untold stories in our lives, and a million reasons for not telling them, but I will hold us today to one story I know we can tell, one story I know will transform us if we tell it. This is a sermon about belief, and about articulation, but first, history.

National Coming Out Day was founded in 1988, one year after the founding of the AIDS quilt and the March on Washington which accompanied it. It was founded in response to a rising social need and in answer to the AIDS crisis which was decimating gay communities across the country. Now, every year on October 11, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, queer, questioning, and intersex people are encouraged to come out, to tell our stories and the truth about our identities to the people in our lives: colleagues, friends, family, teachers, mechanics, librarians, whomever we know—it is a time to lift up honesty, faith, and trust; it is a time to let a little of our real lives shine.

This year's theme is "Talk About It."

Talk about it. Sounds easy. Sometimes it is. Those are the times when we are blessed. And it's getting easier. But you know what? We queer folks are not the only ones who need a coming out day.

One of our million untold identities here is that of liberal religious faith, and the ways that we live our beliefs into every day. There are things that we can name as faith-based actions. Out loud. In public. We liberal religious can come out.

The queer community has been there before us, and the Human Rights Campaign has a Coming Out resource guide available on their website (<http://www.hrc.org>). It's helpful. It provides reference and story, and the feeling that we're in good company. It also lays out three basic stages of coming out: opening up to yourself, coming out, and living openly.

Through a religious lens, step one is deciding on some internal level that Unitarian Universalism is our faith. Perhaps we have read some material, looked into the history, and claimed this as our religious tradition.

Step two is coming out: that phase, the HRC says, when we are actively talking about our identity with our friends, our colleagues, and others whom we know: telling family that we've joined a UU congregation, or telling a colleague that Wednesday is choir rehearsal night.

But this third step, the living openly step, it's not as easy or obvious. Like someone who's asexual, or someone who's single and gay, or bisexual and partnered with a different-sex partner, we are invisible as people of Unitarian Universalist faith until we make it an issue. Unless someone says something that we have to respond to, religious affiliation doesn't come up in common conversation very often. The clerk at the hotel is unlikely to ask about your religion when you're booking a room; the street is unlikely to be a more dangerous place to walk alone because you belong to a community of faith.

So how do we get the word out, authentically, and without seeming to be phony? Perhaps we should ask our children: being a Unitarian Universalist child or youth in a conservative environment means explaining and defending your faith often. "Are you Christian or Jewish?" "Neither, I'm Unitarian Universalist." "What's that?" ...and you're off. Adults don't ask the same questions children do. We are not as direct as we once were, not as unselfconscious about our pressing curiosity. So even if someone would like to know what your religion is, they are unlikely to ask.

Of course, we could just say it. It feels awkward at first, like the first time your grandmother pronounces the word "les-bee-an", the syllables clumsy and foreign on her tongue. "What brings you here?" to this service project, this outreach, this volunteer organization? What brings you to this protest march, this benefit concert, this break in the routine of the everyday. What brings you to this work? What brings you to this life?

It is of course other life circumstances. And it is a thousand coincidences. But somewhere in the stack of events that conspired to get you to draw breath in that particular place and time is probably your church or your faith, or someone you met at coffee hour. If it is, the question is a good time to say so. Sure, you can pass it up, talk about lifelong dedication to the cause or whatever came after the impulse to justice or to caring. But what came before? And if it was a religious belief, why not claim it? We have no business complaining that no one has ever heard of us unless we are prepared to stand up and make some noise.

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But really, what can we make noise about?

What do you believe?

What do you believe in?

What are you telling over and over, and to whom?

Do you know that you are the next beacon?

We should be horrified to hear that people were UU all their lives and never knew it.

Didn't know it? Why not? Why did they have to dig it up or stumble upon it?

--if people are telling that story, that means that we aren't doing our jobs. We who already know and love this faith are too shy or too selfish to share.

Let me tell you a story about shy.

When I was in elementary school, I was incredibly shy. I didn't talk in front of people, ever. Only the threat of failing a class could get me to answer the teacher's questions. I would shake. I would tremble. I would choke. I would blush. It was awful.

Then I got to seventh grade. About halfway through the year, in *reading* class (I thought that made it doubly unfair—I liked reading) we were assigned something new and dreadful: a four minute speech from notes.

I spent the whole two weeks sick to my stomach, unable to write, unable to think about anything except the assignment. I couldn't get out of it without making a fuss. I couldn't bear to be at the center of a fuss. I cried, I drafted, I shredded, I cried some more. Finally in exasperation I wrote the entire thing word for word on my 3x5 cards...about the trauma of writing a speech. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

When the teacher called on me I went to the front of the room and read it, choking, blushing, heart pounding above the sound of my voice. And...remember, this is public middle school in a mid-sized city...my class applauded when I was done. I was not popular. I was not well-liked. I was one of the class geeks in a class of honors students. But they applauded, out of grace.

Bless their hearts. And if they have it, then so does the person who is curious enough to ask about your faith, to ask about your choices, to want to know what you do and why you do it. Shy is no excuse. If someone asks, they want to hear. When we go through a queer coming-out, often people will say that their parents carefully avoid asking questions which lead to answers they don't want to hear, but the reverse is also true. Someone who is willing and ready will ask about a partner, a date, a book on your shelf. Like our children, we ask for the information we can handle. So if someone asks, tell them. They want to know. Really.

You could start practicing now.

What are you *telling over and over*?

Do the people in this room know?

Could you say it at coffee hour?

Could you walk out those doors in 30 minutes and share what you believe with three other people?

If not,

why not?

If you cannot share your faith with members of your church community, with whom can you share it? I care deeply that you have a theology, but I don't discriminate based on what you believe. Whatever your truth is, I want to know this:

how did you get there? How did you find the path to that believing? And how can you share it?

If we want to grow as a faith and as a congregation, then we must grow as individuals. The individual and the community life are not separate; we are not at odds. Our individual development is about deepening our understanding, our spirituality, our identity. It is about deepening our faith and the life of faith. It is about living and articulating our practice.

And if you are well grounded, if your religious life is well developed, then you have an obligation to talk about it. you have had the luxury, the grace, the good fortune, the skill and the perseverance to develop your faith life, to nurture that glowing coal, to feed it and breathe the breath of life into it, to find your way into knowing where you belong—now you who know must make yourselves whole by speaking out, by sharing what you have found. Light the way for those who follow you, for we dare not, we cannot, we must not close the gates behind you, for you were not the first to need and find our message of hope, and you will not be the last.

But opening those gates is not the final step. When Rome built roads, they knew that without roads there is no trade, there is no exchange, there is no flow of energy, of wisdom, of ideas. We must throw the gates wide and build a road, a beautiful, inviting causeway to our front doors. And we must put up signs.

I have moved often. One of the hardest things in a new town is navigating. There is a specific issue that comes up again and again: no street signs. I call it “If you’re not from around here, why are you driving?” because it tells me that I will be welcome in a place only when I have memorized the map. Is that how we want to welcome people to our congregations? If not, let’s get those gates open, let’s build that path, and let’s hang signs.

We *have* three signs, road signs. They have our congregational name, and a chalice, and directions to this building. They are big and easy to read.

They are stacked neatly behind the sanctuary, against the shed.

Janine, my partner, noticed them first, and asked me about them, so I asked around. Apparently they got torn down. Several times.

...so we gave up? This is the place where the congregation refused to die, where in 1865 you resurrected the 1835 congregation, where in the seventies you sold the building so you could sustain the congregation, where you have, with 100 members, a beautiful sanctuary and a brand new RE wing, paid off and in frequent use. This is the place where the response to triple-booking the church is a celebration of the liveliness of the place and a careful consideration of the parking problems. This is the place where the congregation is living proof that liberal religion in Downeast Maine will not die.

We can put up signs more times than anyone can knock them down, because this is our place and we are here to stay. Let’s get those signs back in the ground.

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...why do you come here?
...what is this faith to you?

The purposes and principles have become the easy answer, so I'm going to suggest you look past them. Get out your glasses and go deep into your heart. What calls to you in the still, small voice?

What says, here am I,
take me?

Because that thing is at the core of your faith, at the centre of joy and possibility and potential. That thing is the thing you are so compelled to answer that you are here instead of anywhere else on Sunday morning, gathered in community to fill up your spirit, to ask and answer the questions that feed your soul. That thing is the thing that you need. That thing is the very force of your life.

And in this dying, chaotic world, the forces of life are in short supply. We have good news. We have a joyful and powerful message. We have a rigorous tradition if we choose to engage with it, and if we bring it to the world, the world can answer our call. We have been active in this country for over 200 years, and our unwillingness to proclaim our faith has run its course. It's time for a new way. It's time for a new approach. It's time to lift up our voices and sing out our name. It's time to proclaim the faith that we share, to offer it up to our communities and to the world.

We have a salvific faith: *salvific*, that which saves. And yes, this is salvation in the religious sense, in the sense of heaven and hell and our Universalist forbears who called down salvation for all the world, every last one of us. Our message, this business of hope and self-defined theology, this work and its rich reward of religion we can believe in, it is salvific. It can save us: from despair, from fear, from distance, from separation, from self-destruction. It can connect us; it leads us to draw on our strengths for good work in our communities and in the world. When this individual work is well underway, we must grow together.

The time is past for false binaries; the time is past for mistaken identities; The time is past for not being known and seen and understood for who we are. The time is past for silence, the time past for people not at the table, the time is past for being seen and not heard, for being invited but not included, for being outside looking in. We live in pluralistic world and we must claim our place in the ranks of possibility. We are a strong and vibrant. We must make ourselves known. Stand up. Speak up. Come out. We need every voice.
blessed be
and amen.