

Courageous Connectional Curiosity
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme - Emily Layfield

I've always been deeply curious about people. I've also always been very reserved and extremely worried about imposition and consent and the potential of creating discomfort, so my curiosity has primarily flowed through perhaps less direct channels. I am a lover of fiction with interiority. I spent many years studying acting for the chance to embody other lives. I am a keen observer and listener in group settings, and these days I spend a solid chunk of my leisure time on the kinds of internet forums where people mull over interpersonal dilemmas or think through everyday ethical conundrums. All of the ways it's possible to be a human in the world fascinate me.

There are times this inclination feels like it holds a values tension - I don't want to be a voyeur, or a gossip - and holding that tension keeps me honest and careful, but I wonder if there is intrinsic value to this form of curiosity when approached without judgement. I think a lot about the loving kindness meditation, metta, where well wishes are directed towards others. It isn't necessarily about the recipients being aware that they are having attention directed their way so much as the practice of directing compassion itself. Can curiosity that is kind and non-judgmental and not extractive, that is open to connection and understanding rather than solidifying othering, be a worthy and ethical practice? For me, I think of it like empathy reps, making the overall picture of the other a little bit more nuanced and detailed, and sometimes opening up whole new ideas of how it is possible to move through the world.

The thing about this kind of curiosity though is that it doesn't really look like anything. A deeply curious and lovingly attending person holding space but not wanting to impose can look exactly the same as a disinterested or incurious person. And that's worth reckoning with too. But I am learning to be ok with the fact that my curiosity is often a quiet one - not necessarily valuable because the person feels it directly, but because it shapes me. It holds open the door for me to receive others exactly how they are.

Courageous Connectional Curiosity By Rev. Lazarus Justice Jameson

Introduction:

I am Rev. Lazarus Justice Jameson, my pronouns are they and them and it is great to be back with you all lovely folks at UUCV. The last time you saw me, I was in glitter and had a mustache - October, I believe - for drag church. Today - a little less glitter. Since its been a minute, and less of us are in drag, though just as fabulous, when we get to speak later please reintroduce yourself.

Also church - it is beautiful to see all of you at once here, and thanks for crowding in a bit. I heard in your sermon last week you all decided to get gender neutral bathrooms and that project is happening next month - and I want to say how grateful I am for that, as those bathrooms will make it safer and more comfortable for me and other queer and trans people, publicly out or not, to take care of natures call and get back to other business. So many congrats yall.

Like I like to do, I want to make sure I welcome any guests we have amongst us - so no pressure guests IRL or online, but would love to welcome you especially into this beloved community seeking to make meaning together.

In the time since I saw you all last, I have been serving as an interfaith psychiatric chaplain resident at Oregon State Hospital - which is a LOT of words to say I spend a good chunk of my days helping people experiencing severe and persistent mental illness make meaning of their lives and their experiences, and with the staff who care for them. Most of my patients are folks who hear things others do not, see things I and you do not see - mainly with diagnosis of schizophrenia or something akin to it of some kind or another.

What I have learned from them, and continue to learn, again and again and again, is to be CURIOUS about the world and our place in it - and come to place of radical acceptance of what is. When I say radical acceptance, I DO NOT want you to hear “acceptance and not liberation”, “acceptance and not protest”, “acceptance and not advocacy” because I mean all of those things too. Curiosity leads me to wonder at what I or another experience, and accept it as the given with less shame, to just name it as fact in my or shared reality, and then move forward toward more liberation.

A couple of months ago, one of my patients was in the central hub of the unit - the spot where anything that happens interesting happens. There's a large counter space, and staff and patients and all of their / our stuff plus newspapers and a puzzle and dice and magazines and more spread over it and at least half the staff and half the patients who are out of their rooms at all times. Well, one of my patients was hanging out there, singing to herself at the top of her lungs and intermittently screaming some lyric. It was DISRUPTIVE and was agitating other patients and staff alike. I was grumpy and I said (quietly, I thought, to a nurse but well I do nothing uh small or quiet) I grumped and said "geez she is SO LOUD" and yall.... The stares that got stared at me. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, from all the staff standing around to a half dozen of my patients in ear shot FROZE and stared at me. I stared back, trying to calculate what I had done wrong - and so I needed to approach my own self with curiosity. Well... a patient just told the issue of my inquiry. She said "Laz I could hear you on the elevator come up" Which is outside the unit. I checked myself, thought about how I was working on radical acceptance, and said "oh. Really? Oh. Well." still loud, still me, and I am no less loved for it.

Let's get into it.

How familiar are yall with the Dao de Jing? Tao te Jing - same thing. We read from the Ursula Guin version which does a beautiful job with contemporizing language and being conscious of removing gender, and I have been reading from (show red book - link is <https://a.co/d/0ioVwKHg> for manuscript readers). Anyone an expert? Never heard of it? Somewhere in the middle?

This was new to me - my interfaith, intertradition learning has been broad but was not taught anything about ancient Chinese religions. I have spent the last few months immersed in this book because of a patient who was in a class I am teaching - Magic Ritual and me- at the hospital about magic and new age spiritual practices. We've been doing astrology, tarot card reading, palm reading. Y'all can I tell you? One of the best ways I've ever encountered to challenge and to change power dynamics - is for the marginalized group in the situation to learn and use "secret knowledge". I've got to tell you, some of the most beautiful encounters I've seen at the hospital are my patients pulling tarot or oracle cards for nurses or reading the the palms of their prescribers, because suddenly these folks are distributors of sacred knowledge - and conducting deep conversations

about the lives and history of staff who otherwise watch and record and medicate them twenty four /seven - reversing who is offering care or intervention to whom.

So I went regularly for a while to visit one of my class attenders on their unit and over a couple of visits, I learned about their spiritual practices, including that they read one chapter of the Dao every day as a way to guide their life...and so I dove into it to better meet their needs. Well, one day recently They stopped me - I was mid RUN down the hall - recently to give me a life update and tell me insistently that I needed to read chapter 47, and then read it to me. In the hall. About exiting no doors, not rushing past what is (as I was doing, clearly) to get to some other truth and missing what was present. What was present - was them, my patient, the opportunity to bear witness to the life they were living and shaping and the wrestling with their values they were doing and the dreams they were bringing into life. My patient stopped me to ask to be seen using this ancient text. Their action said: Be curious about me! Give me the gift of acceptance. Let me give you this wisdom, let me offer in reciprocity that I see you running and I tell you you don't have to run. Perhaps what you have inside of you is everything you need.

Chapter 47 is:

“You don’t have to go out the door to know what goes on in the world.

You don’t have to look out the window to see the way of heaven.

The farther you go, the less you know.

So the wise soul doesn’t go, but knows; doesn’t look, but sees;

doesn’t do, but gets it done.”

Laozi, roughly translated “Old Master” is regarded by historians mostly now as a composite mythological figure instead of one author... like authors in many of our scriptures. Like in Christian tradition, a singular man named Moses did not write the Torah - which includes the tale of his own dying, then put down his pen and die - that's preposterous and far from the scholarly consensus of a plurality of authorship over time from oral traditions, and the Pauline letters of the new Testament scholars know were mostly not written by the same author but a plurality of authors (and that's okay - Genesis or the Torah more broadly, the New Testament are still revered books containing wisdom regardless how they were composed or by whom - and if this is interesting to you, you could get curious about how we ended up with what we have in each of these.

SO Laozi, of tradition if not history, is a scholar - perhaps a member of a royal court. He's WEALTHY wealthy - not just "shops at Zupans" wealthy but like "is a backer of the Portland Fire" wealthy, and he has time to contemplate the best ways for a leader to lead their people, about 2500 years ago. Tradition says that he spent many years writing this work of 81 chapters, probably hung out with Confucious, and then disappeared into the woods to live his final time as a spiritual seeker.

The Book of Life outlines a rule of Life like many other traditions - that is, an explicit outline of HOW one should live. (in Tapestry of Faith curriculum - this is UU nerd stuff yall so apologies if this misses you - wasn't there an activity for bridgers / confirmands to write a rule of life?)

Might have heard about Rules of life - in monastic contexts.

Benedictine rule of life was 3 - 3s

Balance of Life: Prayer, Work and Study

Vows: Stability (stay put in your particular community), obedience (to God and to leader), Conversion of life (continued spiritual transformation)

Values: Hospitality, Humility, Silence

Pop quiz church - what are the shared UU rule of life? (UU values - interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, generosity, justice with love at the center) - give a candy bar. No seriously I have one for you in pulpit - these are values this community gathers around.

(Bonus: 8th principle - explicitly dismantle racism and other oppressions - also give candy bar.)

The Rule of Life suggested by Laozi and the Dao could be, at least in part: For the Good of the Community, make your actions match the moment making them effortless ("doesn't do and gets it done") and live in non-competition.

Lets read Chapter 12 again:

"The five colors blind our eyes. The five notes deafen our ears.

The five flavors dull our taste.

Racing, chasing, hunting, drives people crazy.

Trying to get rich ties people in knots.

So the wise soul watches with the inner not the outward eye,

letting that go, keeping this.”

There are five notes in the ancient Chinese musical scale, five traditional colors, five flavors (bitter, salty, sweet, salty and pungent), five elements that make up the earth - wood fire earth water metal. Combinations of these make up everything that is - all the tastes, all the visual experience - and too much of any of them causes overwhelm, or here - incongruence with what really matters. Chapter 12 here argues that getting caught up in materialism, wealth, attainment can cause us serious harm and actually dulls us to what is happening internal to oneself and in the community and is missing the point of living - so the Dao let go of competition with each other because true wealth doesn't come from having the most stuff, it comes from the wisdom found through curiosity rooted in community connection. Curiosity about another moves us into solidarity (interdependence) with them as listening to their stories and then taking action with them intertwines our lives.

I've lived all over the country, and I find that this area is SO competitive with each other - I hear about that pioneer spirit means I can do it myself and that's the reason for competitiveness and more isolation as a rule than anywhere else I've ever lived. The value of liberal religious community like this is that there can be belonging without needing to prove anything. But it's not so easy to just BELONG or even to begin to get curious about each other in a respectful way - it's got to start somewhere. I'd like to give you a question to ask that opens a deeper engagement than just "hello" - try: How does it feel to be you today?

Hospital level mental health care is so different than what I and I suspect you have experienced in weekly therapy, in part, because what is offered is often congregate care as a healing modality. What I mean is - schizophrenia and other similar severe and persistent mental illnesses can be incredibly isolating for patients because what the patient is experiencing is not shared, and so their behavior or speech is often incongruous with whatever the expected behavior in that moment may be by the standards of the care team members. It's also really different kind of care than you may have had if you were hospitalized after a major surgery or for treatment of cancer - because people are encouraged to be and form community with each other and with the staff, and spend time Doing life together. Eating together, playing board games, going for walks, watching this game or that show - because the welcome into community and the acceptance

into a place of belonging is itself healing. And here's the secret: acceptance into community helps people accept themselves. What I say is: Belonging gives me a way to accept and even cherish the parts of me I have not accepted yet because those who know and see me already accept and cherish as just part of me. And this therapeutic milieu approach to care doesn't just transform patients, it offers transformation to staff - including to me - because anyone in any place in an org chart or corporate ladder - also needs radical acceptance too.

My argument is this: That in awakening curiosity through connection means that healing and acceptance are on offer for you too - and that you can offer this to others through mutuality, solidarity in connection.

What I am learning again and again from my patients is to be curious and radically accept what is. For me, again and again, my job is NOT to "fix" people but to walk beside them.... And what a freeing thing this is. I don't have to "reality orient" people. Its arguable if trying to tell anyone that their lived realities aren't real when they are what people themselves are experiencing them as real as every other experience... But whether or not reality orienting is effective, I never have to do it. I spend my time helping people make meaning within whatever they are experiencing exactly where they are, beginning with this radical acceptance that what they say is true to them and important. I think that's part of what holds us back from one another - that if you tell me about your career, I have to judge you and rank you and compare you and I get lost in that... when really.... we could choose to listen to each other and honor what is shared, be curious about why this particular thing is important to you and honor that meaning - instead of competing, ranking. At the hospital, I have gotten the honor of companionship such luminaries as the Pope, the Holy Spirit, and recently, a vampire seeking vampiric scriptures. I've met a couple of different Jesus's at the hospital - and one of the most magical things I have ever experienced was on a day I was asked to come and bless a number of rooms on my unit - as there were reports of ghosts and demons bothering patients and the staff reported weird vibes. So off I go to the requested doors with a patient-made ritual object in hand (a flower especially made by someone for this purpose) with their patient residents in tow to talk about what was happening and to co-construct with them the appropriate blessing using the language they preferred for divinity - or skipping language of the divine altogether. I would stand outside the door and put my hands up to bless the room or cast out the demon or ask the ghost to chill out or go haunt

somewhere else while my patients waved the flower around their room. This went as I had expected until I go to Jesus's room with their roommate, and all three of us discuss what's going on in their shared room. Jesus tells me I can bless their room but then Jesus would like to bless their roommate and me. Jesus says a very astute prayer over me, and then comes with me to bless the room of another Christian patient, who says when I ask if it is okay that Jesus stands with me to do the blessing "Who am I to turn down the blessing of Jesus?"

How? Things are shifting around here, with one summer service for a while instead of two, your beloved minister retiring and an interim being announced, changes to the building, and a summer of festivals and vacations and shifting that brings you to new places and new faces potentially to your pews. In this time of shift, the invitation is to lean in to connection including and especially those are on the margins. There's a mass migration here from redder places - and it is HARD to find friendship here by befriending a new Portlander/ Vancouverite. Its pride season and Vancouver's pride block party is Saturday June 13, from 12 to 7 in the area near Dandelion teahouse off w 7th and Washington. Awaken curiosity and go to pride - respectfully, and listen to the speakers, talk to the artists and non-profits and performers about their stories and share your own - if you needed permission or encouragement to go to pride - this is both. And you can begin with talking to someone new at coffee hour, even inviting someone to lunch with you or to your home for tea or dinner in the next week or two to share stories and begin to be community for each other. Awaken connectional curiosity and act on it.

Conclusion:

And hear this: You, exactly as you are, are deeply loved. Because you are human, you were born with inherent goodness. Because you are human, there are parts of you you find hard to love, accept, name as good - and you carry shame. Give yourself over to the goodness inside of you and slow down enough to listen - and challenge the need to compete by choosing connection and curiosity that guides us, in solidarity with each other, toward radical acceptance of each other - and the harder task - toward radical acceptance of ourselves.

Amen.