

Safe Spaces/ Brave Spaces



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My curiosity was once again peaked about these two concepts, when Sheila shared a paper that was presented at a conference she had recently attended, with some of our 15 West Teen Coffeehouse youth. I had long been quibbling with the concept of safe spaces and how that doesn't square with the world as I know it. But that someone had written and published about it was interesting and I was glad to have the paper to read. Maybe safe space was a term that had out used its usefulness for me because of a lot of group work that I have done. Maybe safe space was a term that had stopped working when once too often I had experienced people using that concept to avoid doing some hard personal or interpersonal work especially around issues of challenging topics. And certainly having been Chair of the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee of the UUA, in the late 1990's early 2000's we consistently heard people say to the committee that they didn't like what we were doing because it violated their sense of safe space. Well the concept of safe space has not been one of my favorite terms for a while; but brave space I can relate to that.

However, before I go there let me share a couple of thoughts about safe space. The concept of safe space often gets stated as a ground rule for how

groups should function, but for those of you who have been engaging in small group here know when you truly and deeply engage with a topic, when you truly and deeply begin to share your innermost thoughts, beliefs and ideals it feels anything but safe. Feeling that doesn't make you stop sharing but it does make you consider some important factors about being in the group as you make a decision to enter brave space. As our reading this morning stated some come to this church as a place of safety because your personal life boat has been rocked too much and you want something safe or because you think your life boat should be rocked to cause you to move out of a safe zone. It is hard to maintain both of those concepts and in fact it is dishonest to try to do so. Personal healing and transformation does not guarantee safety. I do hope, however, that we guarantee a place to harbor and support you and to hold you in love with compassion and caring no matter what you are going through. But if this was all you imagined a safe place to be then how could we help you to change, to dare, and to experience a new way of being.

Also if we just stop at being a safe place then social justice would never occur. For it is risky business to engage in social justice especially if social justice is involved in helping break apart systems of oppression, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, economic inequality, etc.

Don Robinson, a long time UU minister writes this about social justice.

“Many people use the term social justice in self-serving ways in what they mean by social justice is “just Us”

But social justice can only begin with the interaction between fortunate people and those who are disadvantaged. It is incumbent upon those who, by virtue of the accident of birth or other circumstances have good jobs, good educational background and good lives, to come to the assistance of those who face formidable obstacles to getting an education and leading fulfilling lives.

Social justice insists that people are not their circumstances; they are their *possibilities*. Social justice demands, that all people regardless of their

birth circumstances, are entitled to a fair chance at life, that every person has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. ”

If we begin with an interaction between fortunate people and those who are disadvantaged, well this is far from providing safe space to have those deep meaningful interactions. In fact the tension is insurmountable and this is why I like having some guidelines about establishing brave space.

I think one of my core values is believing that church and our Unitarian Universalist religion and this space should be a learning environment, a learning lab if you will. Learning oft times requires that we take risks, that we are challenged and that we challenge others. If without thinking it clearly through we state that this is a safe place we are setting ourselves and others up for difficulties, especially in regards to social justice issues. Those difficulties could result in resistance and denial and when that happens I think we then set up boundaries and sides. When this happens we lose empathy and compassion and get more and more entrenched in maintaining our positions of privilege and power. I do so wish when I was chairing the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee that I had read about the concept of brave space/ versus safe space. I think I might have been able to effect more change in our anti-oppression efforts and probably I might not have turned gray of hair and long in tooth quite so young.

Around 2008, the conversations about racism, and oppressions in general began to focus on having “courageous conversations about--- you name the topic.” I am not sure that we of the dominant group fully grasped what that meant for us; for up until that point the dominant group had, well frankly, dominated the topic by requiring that the conversations be maintained in safe space mode. I am sure most of you have had conversations about racism, sexism, heterosexism, economic inequality, US centrism, ableism and these were anything but safe. In fact, they were risky and if you were the one having to shift your world view or having to confront your own part in the systemic

oppression of others you needed to learn how to become very vulnerable and exposed and open and willing to be still and listen.

The recent hullabaloo about transgender bathrooms brings home to me the importance of how we frame discussions and dialogue. Maybe we Unitarian Universalist can help set up some brave spaces where these conversations can take place. Let's use this topic as a way to look at what some of the ground rules might need to be.

How many of us have resorted to the ground rule, "well we will just have to agree to disagree?" what does this ground rule state and let's look at what and whose voice is missing in it. First it is clear that there is going to be disagreements and conflict but reverting to the statement "we will just have to agree to disagree" doesn't move the topic deeper and it can serve the purpose of allowing the [dominant group] to opt out of further discussion. The article I read suggested that instead of "agreeing to disagree" a new ground rule might be "controversy with conflict." This term came down through a social change model of leadership development. *Controversy with conflict* is defined as " a value whereby different views are expected and honored with a group commitment to understand the source of disagreement and to work cooperatively toward common solutions." ⁱⁱ Can you imagine anything happening to resolve the issue about transgender bathrooms if the ground rule was 'we will have to agree to disagree'? Will change occur and who will be making the decision and how will genuine conversation take place. And the controversy hasn't been framed with much civility lately either. And the common refrain is it is a matter of safety. We might ask whose safety? The safety of a transperson such as some of our youth who hold off urinating all day rather than going into a place where they are unsafe; namely using the toilet of their assigned birth gender. Or requiring them to use the toilet area assigned to their birth gender where they could be targeted and risk being attacked verbally and physically? I know they can go to the nursing station but I have heard that can be pretty intimidating too and inconvenient. Or are we

worried about the safety of the dominant group who set the rule up in the first place and who because of an unwillingness to engage with the others would keep the status quo. I like the guideline we follow here. We have one toilet designated male, one female and one neutral meaning whoever wants to use it- fine.

The discussion of bathrooms for transgender people is a huge topic, I don't have time in the message today to address it in detail but rather I suggest you take some time to think about the complexity and using the idea of brave space have a conversation.

It appears to me that the idea of brave space involves being authentic in our interactions and dialogues and having a willingness to own and be aware of our intentions and impact. As the authors of the article state, this is a more important way of learning who we are and who we want to be to and helping us to shift and transform ourselves.

Transformation of ourselves is never easy. Some who attend here came out of traumatic situations, abusive relationships, self-abuse and/or addictions, and some of us are part of the group who holds the position of power by virtue of our birth, racial identity, or economic positions. However, we come to church and in particular to Unitarian Universalist churches in part because we know that we are going to be asked to look at ourselves, to look at our identity, to look at what we believe and how we came to believe what we believe, and how those beliefs get played out with our loved ones and in the world we live and move and breath in. I assume we came because we want to learn, we want to become better, to do more acts of kindness, change those parts of ourselves we don't like and to find new ways of being. I have long said that being in our church community gives you an environment to try new ways of being. Giving you a brave space, where you can step into zones of discomfort, giving you a brave space where you can learn and practice how to challenge yourself and

others, where you can experience the clumsiness of making mistakes and engaging in helpful conflict is important.

I believe if you wanted a safe space you wouldn't set foot out of the door of your house, you wouldn't be open to trying new things. Even the fact that we take time during some services to gather in groups and talk about tough issues, even the fact that worship services shift in how they are done and that you keep coming lets me know you are brave and respectful of yourself and others. Just because we challenge on another doesn't mean we don't respect one another, in fact, I dare to say because we dare to challenge and question and raise questions and issues it means that we do truly respect one another.

As we try to learn how to live with harmony in an increasingly diverse world. Diverse on all sides and in so many more ways than we can someday even imagine; it becomes more and more important that we find healthy ways to establish brave spaces.

I am back to where I started, aren't I? It has been a long time since I experienced anywhere as a safe space, I find life and living and loving the other very risky and I feel vulnerable much of the time, I feel challenged sometimes but all the time I feel as the reading this morning reminded me- blessed is the spot where mention of the holy has been made. That holy spot is anywhere where I am with others who are able to be brave with me.

May we make this holy spot a brave spot.

ⁱ *Voices from the Margins*. Editors Jacqui James and Mark Morrison - Reed.

ⁱⁱ *The Art of Effective Facilitation. From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces; A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice*. Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens. 2013 Stylus Publishing 2013