

# Safe Congregations

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First preached at First Unitarian Church in Worcester

Sunday, September 21, 2014

We like to think of our church as a friendly forest. We like to think of this place as a place where all people are welcome and where we all treat each other with respect and dignity. It's even in the [first principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association](#): "We [congregations] covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." On the face of it, that doesn't seem hard. We'll all agree to be welcoming and nice to each other, to learn about each other's differences and be better together than we are apart.

But there are times when it's hard. Think about the lamb and the tiger (Friedman 25-28). The animals were hard put to welcome the tiger and welcome the lamb at the same time. It's not enough to post a rule saying, "No eating other animals." The lamb needed actual safety in the forest, safety from being thought of as food, and needed the community as a whole to stick up for her safety. The forest leaders needed to say, "The way we welcome tigers here in the Friendly Forest is by letting them live here--in cages. This allows for the safety of the lambs who live here." It is not only for Unitarian Universalists that making that kind of rule is hard. Human communities have trouble keeping predators at bay. It takes solidarity, vision and leadership from all of us to make our church a safe space for all people.

No place in our environment is completely safe. We wouldn't want it to be: we all run risks in order to grow as people. And the world itself is inherently risky. It's hard to accept as parents that we can only provide so much safety for our children. As much as we like to think otherwise, complete safety isn't possible. Simply being alive is risky. We will teach children the dangers of traffic and accidents will still happen. Children will be supervised and still fall off the play structures at school. We make heroic efforts to keep our children safe from sexual predators, but children are still abused. For some kids, for kids living in violent communities or kids who are bullied at school for who they are, safety may be very hard to come by.

So one hard truth I have to recognize, as a mother of young children myself, is that my kids can't be safe. The best I can do is to try to create a safer environment, where they will not be coerced or abused, so that they can take their own risks and do their own exploring in life. I can do my best to make their world safer, even if true safety isn't possible. So when it comes to religious community, we have to try to create that safer environment for our kids.

Our church has done some really good work to create that safer environment. We ask adults to work in pairs or teams with the kids so that relationships between adults and children are always shared and open. We try to make sure that we know where our kids are playing during coffee hour. We run background checks on all our volunteers who work with children. I was background-checked before I was called to be your minister. Our Faith Development staff collected updated background-check forms from every Faith Development volunteer at our teacher training last Wednesday. All these things help create a safer space for our children, and they're all good things to do. We can't create a perfectly safe space for our kids. We want them to be able to take some risks. We can create a safer church home in which they can learn and grow.

If we really want to do that, the policies and practices we have aren't enough. The policies and practices of any church aren't enough. There are other things we have to do which are harder. One is honesty with our children, and another is vigilance. To be honest with our children, we

have to teach them about healthy sexuality, and listen to them if they tell us something's wrong. And on their behalf, we must also be vigilant against predatory and abusive behavior.

At a church I served some years ago we had a young man begin attending services. He was the grown son of another man who had once been a member, although we hadn't seen the father in several years. This young man came with his girlfriend several Sundays in a row. One Sunday after the service he attended a meeting about our religious education program, which included information on how to become a teacher. When the leader of the program mentioned our requirement of background checks for teachers, the young man asked why that was necessary. That was all: just asked why we had that policy.

The leader thought, "Maybe something's wrong here." She was a young woman who had worked at a domestic abuse resource center and in the family courts. She had been around enough to know that bad behavior is all around us, and to recognize that asking why we required background checks was enough of a red flag. So she looked the young man up online, and sure enough, he was a registered sex offender. She told me about it. He didn't come to church the next Sunday.

The week after, the board of trustees met, and we came up with a plan: that the young man had to come to church with a chaperone, and that we had to let the members know that he was a registered sex offender. And obviously he couldn't have any contact with the children and youth. I want to tell you that we agonized over whether or not to "out" him to the community. We agonized over wanting to protect the young man's privacy and dignity. We wished there was a way to include him in the adult church while keeping our children safe. We wished there was a community for him to seek spiritual healing and connection to God. But we couldn't keep his secret for him. And we had to tell the parents in our church an even harder message: just because an experienced volunteer had identified this sex offender, didn't mean that there weren't others. It didn't mean we were safe.

Vigilance is one piece. Open conversations with our children about healthy sexuality are another. Listening to our children and trusting and respecting them is part of the equation. Telling them that we are here for them, that we will always listen to them and take them seriously, is as important a piece of being a safe congregation as all the policies we have in place. With our kids, we can create safer congregations.

Perhaps the hardest part of creating safer congregations is hewing to that ideal in the face of other values that we hold. Recognizing harassment and abuse is hard. Our first instinct is often to preserve peace in the community rather than cleave to our values. There was a well-respected Protestant theologian who, despite all his contributions to religious learning, was guilty of a great moral failing ([Cramer](#)). In community after community, in the universities he taught in and in his denomination, he harassed female colleagues. He exposed himself to them; he intimidated them; he behaved aggressively toward them; he cultivated friendships and then used those friendships to suggest unwanted sexual contact.

He never raped anyone. He never assaulted anyone. He used these distinctions to keep from being held accountable by the institutions he worked with. He was the tiger in the forest, roaming free amongst women who had expected not to be leered at and harassed in their academic and religious communities. After too many instances where women complained, and the theologian denied any wrongdoing, and institutions failed to hold him accountable, one woman he had harassed reached out to others.

She was at first blocked by a denominational leader who said that telling their stories would violate confidentiality. Nonetheless, the women gathered together and asked for a meeting with church officials in order to be heard. They met first on their own, to share their stories and hear how depressingly similar they all were. Then they shared their common narrative with the church leaders. They said, "We needed you to hear this." One woman wrote afterward, "The [church officials] responded in seriousness and respect—some with tears. I believe they were shocked at the extent of John's abuse and the pain it had caused us (Cramer)."

The church valued peace. It had sought a way through the thicket that would harm no one. But in keeping silent, the church had harmed these women. Part of building a safer community is creating a place where everyone's stories can be shared and heard. We must learn to feel our compassion for those who have been harmed before we think of the fallout of embarrassing news. We who live in religious community must learn to be proud of our communities when they stand up to bad behavior and say, "That's not allowed here." We must take the part of those who are harmed, and in so doing, take the part of our own values and our own highest calling as a church. We can never be a completely safe space for those who might be victimized by abusers or bullies. But if we keep our vision firmly fixed on the kind of church we want to be and the good we want to do, if we keep our hearts tuned to the Holy One who is our rock and our guide, we can create a safer church for all who would worship and learn with us.

The challenge for us as religious liberals is to identify our highest values. We value welcoming all people. But we also value safety and respect. How will we decide? I am reminded of something I learned from a mentor in ministry when I myself was a youth. She said, "There is a place for every person in the church, and the work of the community is to find that place." She was thinking of children: there is a place for every child, whether it's a faith development classroom, or in the service with their parents, or helping in the kitchen. But it's a larger thought as well.

There's a place for every person. The children's program is not a place for adults who can't behave safely around children. But a ministry focused on adults and their needs, such as an evening worship service or discussion group, could be that place. A place with women is not a place for a man who wants to harass or abuse women. But a men's group could be. And that men's group could be--should be--a place where men stand up for community values and refuse to allow derogatory talk about women.

In this way the church can offer healing. Not through elevating open acceptance of all behavior over all other values, but through elevating the well-being of respectful community as one of our highest values. Truly, that value points to something even higher. We seek here to create a community where people can find authentic relationship with ultimate meaning, the ground and goal of their existence. Our highest value is that relationship, held together or individually. We seek to build the church where that relationship can be found and the path to God open up before us. That church will be a church of respect and well-being, a safer church, where people are welcomed and good behavior is expected.

That relationship with God, a relationship with the ground and goal of our existence, is not safe. It will carry us across boundaries we didn't even see. It will stretch us all out of shape and lead our lives in new directions. That's our hope for people with abusive pasts who come to our church: whether abuser or abused, we hope the holy leads them in new directions. We ourselves long to be seen for who we are and broken open into something new. The risk isn't our work, but the work of the holy. Our work as a human community is simply to love one

another, to do no harm to our neighbor, but to create the place where true honesty and relationship to the holy may be sought. It's our job to be good neighbors and to create a neighborly and loving church. Let us hold in our hearts our true goal and value: a safer community where we seek authentic relationship in peace.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

Holy One of healing, be with us and amongst us this morning. Hold in your care all those who have been the victims of abuse or violence at the hand of someone they trusted. May they know that they are whole and loved for who they are. May they find healing and peace.

Holy One of justice, challenge those who would harm or take advantage of others. Be the still, small voice in their hearts that calls them back to right relationship. Be in the communities that surround them with vigilance and transparency. Help these people stop from harming even one person.

Holy Spirit of this community, be in us and in our gathering. Call us to our highest values. Help us hear one another and trust one another. Help us have vision to see where we are going and fortitude to stay on the path. With each other and with you, help us know that we are never alone. Amen.

#### Sources

Cramer, et. al. "[Theology and Misconduct: The Case of John Howard Yoder.](#)" *Christian Century* 4 Aug. 2014.

Friedman, Edwin H. [Friedman's Fables.](#) New York: Guilford Press, 1990.

#### Readings

Romans 13: 8-10

["The Friendly Forest"](#) by Rabbi Edwin Friedman