

Building Bridges, One Relationship at a Time

March 18, 2018

Jim Cavanaugh

Reading: Ruby Bridges Demonstrates Moral Imagination

Kathy Stewart, reader

Our first reading is from *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person – Without Exception*, by Nathan Walker, who tells us that

“Over a period of several months in 1960 in New Orleans, child psychologist Robert Coles spoke with Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American who was threatened and taunted by people who opposed her enrollment in a [formerly] segregated school. She told Coles she felt sorry for the people who were trying to kill her.

He clarified, ‘You feel sorry for them?’

‘Well, don’t you think they need feeling sorry for?’ she said.

Later, he wrote, ‘I sat there stunned. I was applying standard psychology, trying to help her realize that she was maybe angry at these people, and bitter and anxious, and she was telling me that she prayed for them. I was struck dumb and I had to reflect upon this child’s wisdom.

Coles ... writings led me to study the variety of ways that people have used the term *moral imagination* ... the ability to ... project oneself into the middle of a moral dilemma or conflict and understand all the points of view.

Understanding does not necessarily mean agreement. I may disagree with your point of view, but often my disagreement prevents me from understanding the true ... nature of your standpoint. If I never demonstrate that I understand you, then I cannot expect you to understand me.”[1]

Responsive reading #657: “It Matters What We Believe”

Nan Cavanaugh, reader

The genesis of this sermon is on the front of your order of service, right under the picture where it says *Build Bridges, Celebrate Community*. I wondered how we would do that, and today’s service is one answer.

There used to be a “Make America Great Again” bumper sticker on my neighbor’s car, and a Trump sign in his yard. When I would see it (especially since reading Nathan Walker’s book *Cultivating Empathy*), I would try to think how to have a conversation with him. But I haven’t succeeded yet. This is really frustrating to me. As some of you know, I have served as a volunteer chaplain at Dauphin County Prison since 2005 and at the Women’s Work Release Center almost as long. As part of my training, I took two fifteen week units of Clinical Pastoral Education, which was supposed to teach me how to be pastoral. That means I ought to be able to listen well, and to talk with all kinds of people, even Trump supporters, wouldn’t you think? Well, I confess to being a work in progress – I am not there yet.

I am talking about building bridges this morning, and because Nathan Walker’s book has enlarged my understanding of empathy, I will be focusing in on ‘building a listening bridge.’ To get an idea of how to start, let’s look at the picture on the front of your order of service, which



shows a suspension foot bridge held up by cables, over a rushing creek.

Now, the process of building a bridge like this can be instructive for all of us, bearing in mind that bridges like this have carried people across streams since ropes were

made strong enough to carry weight.

I have learned that the first step is to get a slender line across the stream, no bigger than heavy string. It is used to pull a light rope across, that rope is used to pull a heavier rope, and so forth, until the cables (or ropes equally strong) are in place. But the whole process begins with a slender line – and that beginning needs to inform my attempt to build a “listening bridge.” I need to begin my conversation with something that connects, but is not too heavy. I will come back to this with an example.

An important part of building any bridge is understanding where **both** ends are. To me, this means finding clarity about where I am as well as where the other person is. My self-awareness is gradually improving, and I have come to appreciate that my choice of words can make a difference, because language can complicate my search for clarity. For example, two people will

unwittingly disagree when they use the same words to mean different things. They think they have a common language, but they don't.

My personal example comes from a long time non-meeting of the minds between me and my wife for over fifty years, Nan. It was about what time we should leave for something with a firm starting time, like church or a play. We would generally arrive timely, in my estimation, so why was she upset? I finally realized that repeated non-meeting of the minds once in a while might be bearable, but a clash that repeats over and over? It became clear that something (or someone) needed to change.

By now, those of you who know me, or know Nan, or know both of us, may be sensing where this is going: We used the exact same words: "On time" to mean different things. For me, being "on time" means walking in as the service or play or whatever starts, or at least not being the last to arrive. For her, it means arriving in time to be comfortably seated and perhaps greet a friend or two, well before things start.

So planning in advance to arrive "on time" was doomed to failure, until we talked about what the other one meant by those familiar words, and came up with a shared definition we could agree on. We've enjoyed a long marriage because we have worked hard to develop a common language.

My experience with non-communication hasn't always been comfortable, but when I am not comfortable, I try to make it a learning experience.

When I go into Dauphin County Prison as a volunteer chaplain, my main task is leading group pastoral counseling, or Chapel Talk. As I tell the group each week, we talk about life issues from a religious or spiritual point of view, with the goal of helping each of us (including me) to tackle tough questions and make thoughtful decisions. When I first started doing Chapel Talks, I thought talking about 'justice' would be a good idea.

Oh, my gosh! It turned out that this middle-class white guy had no idea what it's like to be at the bottom of the power structure, and for some of the guys what it's like to be in prison before trial because you can't make bail. My idea of 'justice' clashed with their experience of 'justice' ... we had no common language.

The good news is, they were reasonably polite as they told me what it's like to be represented by an overworked and thus under-attentive Public Defender, what it's like to wait for someone beyond your control to move a piece of paper or set a court date, and what it's like to be out of touch with those who might help your case, because you can only make collect phone calls to those who will accept the call.

The bad news is, by bringing up a really painful topic, I had added pain to their lives without helping them. So I have been learning to try to put myself in their shoes when picking a topic or discussing one.

I am practicing empathy by concentrating on what the men in the Chapel Talk group are saying, including their tone of voice, and noticing their body language, so I am focused on **them** rather than on what I will reply.

Communication can be non-verbal, I have learned, and that is why I wear a pink shirt each time I visit the Women's Work Release Center as their Chaplain. I explain to newly arrived residents (not inmates) that I have learned that many women 'outside' and most women 'inside' have been abused mentally, physically, spiritually, or "all of the above."

I figure a guy who wears this much pink does not look like a man who would abuse women. I want to look like a 'gentle' man, I point out. I was explaining this to a newcomer, and when I finished she was quiet and then said: 'I was gang-raped when I was fourteen.' There was more silence as I wondered how best to respond, to acknowledge her trust and to respect her openness, and then asked her if she would like me to pray with her. I make this offer frequently, and many women accept, including this one. I had clearly been able to 'build a bridge' between us.

I have realized that talking with my neighbor could begin by wearing one of my Steelers shirts, and by simply talking about the Steelers sticker on his car, because I have one on **my** car and there is one on Nan's car. We have that in common, and Steelers fans generally have some development they can talk about, even in the off-season.

This is the first string across the rushing creek that might lead to a bridge across it, between me and him.

If that conversation goes ok, I could then ask him about what ‘great’ (as in Make America **Great** Again) means to him. **If** that goes well, I could share what it means to me, and see if we have any common ground. I am pretty sure that he saw my HILLARY sign from the election and didn’t like it. And I need to accept that he may not agree with my “No Matter Where You Are From, We’re Glad You’re Our Neighbor” sign in Spanish, English and Arabic. Maybe we can agree to disagree? I am hoping that finding common ground is possible, since I do seek cordial relationships with my neighbors, and I want to start **in my neighborhood** to work at healing the divide that afflicts our society.

A challenging situation we face here at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg comes to life even when we’re trying to build a caring community, like Greg Carrow-Boyd spoke about last Sunday. It happens when we **just don’t talk** with each other—with the person beside us, for instance-- about things that might cause conflict.

That is, until we **have** to talk about them, like at a congregational meeting. This can lead to conflict -- which we typically like to avoid. As Greg wisely pointed out,

“...conflict—a lot or little—will happen in community. I learned here [at UCH] that conflict could shake us to our core or build us up again, but that **we cannot avoid it.** **[emphasis is mine]**

[to continue in his words] “Conflict is a natural and typical component of passionate people with differing life experiences and differing needs who are striving to build something big enough that will work for most of us most of the time.”¹

Thanks for reminding us, Greg. Your village is proud of you.

One way to deal with the conflict we expect as part of normal UU congregational life is to develop and adopt a covenant that reminds us how we will ‘do church’ together. We recited a classic one today in our Unison Words of Affirmation.

¹ From Greg C. Carrow-Boyd, “Building Caring Communities,” sermon preached March 11, 2018 at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, PA

This covenant can guide us, and maybe we need to open each congregational meeting with the words we spoke earlier in this service, in our Unison Words of Affirmation. Let's re-read them together.

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

Thank you

In any case, if we truly want a caring community, we need to build bridges person-to-person, seeking (as Stephen Covey puts it) to understand before seeking to be understood.ⁱ Let me repeat that – it is worth holding onto: we need to seek to **understand** before seeking to be **understood**.

Our first principle tells me that I need to lift up “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and that includes all the people in this congregation whether I've met them or not.

Some questions I wrestle with on my way to building a listening bridge begin with “What do I need to understand about another person in our congregation” to appreciate their inherent worth and dignity? My instinctive response is ‘nothing,’ because I take people at face value, and I try to appreciate them from the start. The key is continuing to appreciate them as I learn more about them, learn that we have both similarities and differences, and that both are **ok**.

What's an example of “troubled water” as this morning's anthem sang about? That is up to the person I am talking with, because ‘trouble is in the eye of the beholder’ (as the saying goes). If I am able to carry the conversation to the level that the person I am talking with shares some trouble they are encountering, this is my time to listen fully and deeply, and to sympathize. I am honored when the space between us is safe enough that the one I am talking with takes the risk of sharing something close to the heart.

So, how can I begin building a “listening bridge” with conversation that's not too heavy? This is where I could use your help, because I am not always good at starting a conversation.

What are some ways to build a ‘listening bridge’ that come to mind **for you**? Let's brainstorm together.

What's your idea? Please write it on the 3x5 card tucked into your order of service and hold it up for an usher to collect and bring up. If you will put S (as in share) or P (as in private) in a top corner, I will read the ones marked S so we can hear some of the possibilities. Those marked P will be compiled with all the suggestions from both of today's services, so no one can tell where they came from – or from whom.

I can start by sharing an example that comes to mind: Attending a church service at either of our locations, and during the coffee hour finding someone I don't know, to talk with.

[Ann plays music for a few minutes]

After all cards have been collected and those marked "S" read aloud: We have heard a variety of ways to start building a listening bridge.

As one of the recently commissioned Lay Pastoral Care Associates – the peer listeners of UCH – I am always trying to do this. I dearly want us to be able to talk with each other about the important stuff, without fear of being put off or put down or ignored. I want us to talk about your troubles, if you are so inclined, while respecting my own boundaries, so that I don't take responsibility for solving the problem I am hearing about.

The greeters and readers this morning are members of our Lay Pastoral Care Associates, and we are wearing our new name tags for a reason. We are a resource to extend and supplement Rev. Lyn's pastoral ministry, and we will be in the same role for our future minister(s). So when you learn of someone in 'troubled waters' you can talk to one of us, or refer them to one of us.

A challenge to building bridges here at UCH is the reality that some of us prefer to attend worship services at Market Street, some prefer Clover Lane, and many are agreeable to either location.

If I always go to church at only one location, I will not meet those who prefer the other location, except at all-church events like coffee house, the annual Auction, the Stewardship potluck, summer picnics, and of course, congregational meetings. A special kind of all-church activity will happen from April 29th till May 6th, when we have Candidating Week, as the Reporter tells us. Future details will be in the April Reporter and News You Can UUs. Attend any of these, and meet some UCH members and friends you don't usually see.

As part of building bridges, we need to appreciate how many different concerns go into deciding whether to attend the services at Market Street or at Clover Lane, particularly for those of us who concentrate on one location. Transportation can be an issue: When nearby residents began attending services at Market Street, we made them welcome, and now we have learned to offer a ride to those who need one to come to Clover Lane. We are the richer for their presence. As we build listening bridges with other UUs who prefer one location or the other, we will be more connected, and this improves the vitality of our congregation – it is the ‘healthy communication’ we need.

And as our UCH Covenant of Right Relations tells us, in the short version printed on the insert in your order of service, we need to “cultivate healthy communication.”

Going back to my neighbor with the Trump sign, I would guess that he felt that some of what used to make America great (in his estimation) had eroded away, and he misses it. If I make it clear that I want to understand where he’s coming from, without necessarily agreeing with his point of view, maybe the rift between us will get smaller. Maybe we can agree to disagree.

Here at UCH, if I make it clear that choosing your way of living out our UU principles is up to **you**, maybe my acceptance of your viewpoint will build a bridge between us.

And if I make it clear that your choice of where to attend Sunday morning worship is up to you for your own reasons, maybe my acceptance of **that** viewpoint will also build a bridge between us.

What I am suggesting is the deep listening UU minister Nathan Walker writes about in *Cultivating Empathy*, so like Ruby Bridges we can understand each other even if we do not agree with each other. The reward if we make the effort is, as Walker puts it, “making meaning of our lives.” He concludes his book on cultivating empathy with his thoughts about what he calls ‘religious fundamentalism – our all-too-frequent UU belief that we have the **only valid answer** to life issues:

“The remedy for this ... begins first with a thought, a belief that it is possible for me to understand another person’s views. I can do so without necessarily agreeing with them

or silencing my own voice. Understanding is a prerequisite for empathy – a sharing in the most intimate of encounters. This encounter becomes an ethical one when we use the moral imagination to see our shared humanity and dare to forge a new way of being with one another.ⁱⁱ

May we recognize our shared humanity and go forward together in love and understanding.

May it be so.

ⁱ in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

ⁱⁱ Nathan C. Walker *Cultivating Empathy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2016) p. 99