

“Polishing the Mirror”

Karen Brock, Namaqua Unitarian Universalist Congregation

My mother worked as a classroom aide during the school year, but in the summer, she often waited tables at a local coffee shop. This was about 40 years ago. One summer, she came home and told us about a new cook named, “Hooper,” who had started to work the same afternoon shift. Hooper was apparently a good cook and my mom was pleased to work with him, even if he was a bit surly. In her respectful way, she called him sir for the first couple of weeks they worked together. Until, Hooper pulled my mom aside and said a bit gruffly, you know I’m not a man, right?

Well, my poor mom didn’t know. She saw a tall, heavy set person in loose blue jeans and short, curly hair under a baseball cap and made assumptions. One of the many fine qualities of my mother is her ability to admit a mistake. Feeling completely mortified, she apologized for calling Hooper “Sir.” Another fine quality of my mother, which can also get her into trouble sometimes, is that she’s utterly honest. She explained quite clearly to Hooper why she thought she was a man.

Yet somehow despite all of this over that summer, my mom and Hooper became friends. Hooper became Kathy. Kathy was a lesbian who sensed this as her identity when she was a teenager. Hoping to reverse the feelings, she thought if she got pregnant and had a child, it would make her straight. It did not. Kathy’s daughter Kerry was about the same age I was, and that summer, we, too became friends. Kathy learned that just because my mother was naïve and inexperienced, that that didn’t mean she lacked compassion. Just because my mom was ignorant about the gay community in rural Colorado in 1970, didn’t mean she didn’t want to learn. I think my mom’s honesty, which I see here as a form of vulnerability, disarmed Hooper and allowed her to open up. My mother went beyond accepting a lesbian at work, she sat down with her and said, “Tell me your story” and she did not judge. Mom thought it was terrible that Kathy had suffered in the ways she had simply because she was different. Mom welcomed her into our home, she included her and her daughter in family gatherings because they had none of their own.

The meaning of our lives lies in our interactions with each other. It’s hard to know who we are in isolation. I am mother, daughter, sister, friend, Unitarian Universalist, worship associate, editor, neighbor. All of those identities involve a relationship with others. It is through the other that we see our reflection; through the other we become conscious of what we are projecting.

In the case of my mom and Kathy, what was immediately reflected back to my mom was her mistake. Then she was able to use that reflection to discover valuable information which then led her to shine back humility, acceptance, and ultimately love. Hooper reflected a gruff wall that initially didn’t let anyone in. But Kathy in the reflection of my mother’s authenticity, opened and softened and experienced a family she said she’d never had before.

In our attempts to become allies to women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and other traditionally-marginalized identities, we’re going to make mistakes, not quite like my mom’s probably, but mistakes nonetheless. Building ally relationships is hard work and in many cases uncharted territory. But we can begin by listening. It’s said that listening is the root of justice. Tell me your story, and in knowing your story, I might know better my own. Maybe, as a

congregation, we can listen, open up, and be authentic. And then pay attention to the gratitude that is reflected back to us as a result of these actions. Pay attention to what self-discoveries we make in that reflection. The meaning of our lives lies in our interactions with each other. Or as the song says, “All we are is how we treat each other.”

Isn't that what all of these protests the last few weeks have been about? They are a way for people to gather together and say, not just that you are welcome, but that you are included, that we are all together. That your life matters and adds to the strength of our society and culture. Through our differences, and I mean all the differences—on both sides of the aisle—we must find a way to include each other, must find a way to look into the mirror of each other and see a piece of ourselves.

I go back to the idea that Doug raised last week, about drawing the circle wide to allow everyone in. And I go back to the idea that Brad raised last week that as UUs we have a responsibility to advocate for justice, for peace, for love. We have an opportunity by becoming a welcoming congregation to say to members of the LGBTQ community, not just that you are welcome, but that “We are listening. Here, you are included. Here, you are loved.”