

Being Welcoming

Rev. Ann Kadlecek and the Inclusivity Team
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reflection

Rev. Ann Kadlecek

Today's service builds on and brings together three of my previous sermons this fall – the ones in October on accountability and boundaries, and last week's service on belonging.

These are all general and widely applicable concepts. But ... when we get a little more specific, it can get more challenging.

Still, together ... we can do it.

Our story tells us that words can hurt. They sure can. Sometimes the person speaking the words knows that they're hurtful, and says them anyway.

But more often, hurtful words are spoken with no ill intent whatsoever. As Unitarian Universalists, we try not to do this. But it happens.

And the more diverse our community, the more likely this is. Because each of us has a different experience of the world, different feelings, different perspectives ... different things that hurt us. And those differences become larger with any form of diversity. As a white, cis, middle class, currently able-bodied, institutionally-educated woman of a certain age, my experience has a lot in common with other white, cis, middle class, currently able-bodied, institutionally-educated women of a certain age – and that commonality helps us to interact within that demographic without accidentally hurting each other very often.

But the fewer the commonalities, the more likely accidental hurt becomes. Especially when marginalized identities are involved. There are ways in which I will never fully grasp what it's like to hold a different identity. I can't help this. My experience ... is mine. Just as yours is yours. And the things that hurt us will never be exactly the same.

But if I love you, in the capital L love sense (the love that is at the heart of this faith), I am called to listen to you. And if you tell me that my words or actions have hurt you, I am called to believe you, even if what I did seems trivial, to me. And I am called to do my best to understand the hurt, and to change what I'm doing, even if I never intended harm and even though I know I will never fully understand.

And if I have the experience of being hurt by your words or actions, I have the right to expect that you, too, will listen, and be open to change.

I'm not talking here about name calling, or objectively belittling language with a more universal impact. I'm talking about more subtle words and actions. It might be hurtful to touch your hair, or ask where you come from, or where you went to school. It might be hurtful to confuse your name with that of another person of color, to ignore your pronouns, be overly familiar, or make assumptions about who you are and what you need or can offer based on age, appearance, accent, address and so on ...

These might be less obvious than name calling. And if they were to happen once or twice, they might be no big deal. But when they happen a lot they are a big deal. Especially when they touch on marginalized identities.

We're calling such words and actions "subtle acts of exclusion," abbreviated SAE. This terminology comes from the work of Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran,¹ who define subtle acts of exclusion as **"the subtle, confusing, insidious things that people say and do that end up excluding people with marginalized identities."**

Such words and actions are often referred to as microaggressions, but that term is a bit misleading. For one thing, "micro" suggests that the impact is small. And "aggression" suggests ill intent. But Jana and Baran explain that "for the most part, people are not intending to exclude others at all. In fact, it's quite the opposite. They may be trying to compliment someone or learn more about a person or be funny or build closeness."²

All good intentions. But when it comes to being welcoming, intentions don't matter. All that matters is the impact – the experience of exclusion.

The Albany UU Inclusivity Team has chosen subtle acts of exclusion as the focus – for all of us - for this year. And I'm glad they did. If we all can get better at noticing them, listening to those who experience them at our hands, and changing what we do, this congregation will be ever more welcoming, ever more a place where people who hold all marginalized identities can exhale, and be wholly themselves, and belong.

So may we listen so that we can hear;
May we hear so that we can feel;
May we feel so that we can know; and
May we know so that we can change ourselves and this world

¹ Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran, *Subtle Acts of Exclusion: How to Understand, Identify and Stop Microaggressions*, Second Edition, Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023.

² Ibid. p. 1.