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Open acceptance of others defines the Unitarian faith

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My congregation invited Ahmed Noor to speak to us as part of one of our Sunday services during the month of August. Dr. Noor, a trustee of the Mosque and Islamic Center of Hampton Roads, was featured in a recent Daily Press article about Ramadan, and when he visited us he spoke about Islam and the Muslim approach to God, life, family, community, learning and service. My congregants asked respectful questions and Dr. Noor answered them gracefully, helping us to learn more about a religious tradition with which many of us — including myself — are regrettably unfamiliar.

Now why would we invite a leader from another religious tradition to speak to us? After all, we have our own religious tradition, not to mention myself and others in the congregation who can speak to it. Well, the Unitarian part of our tradition derived from New England Congregationalism, as practiced by the Puritans, when covenant — that is, our commitments to one another in witness of a higher power — came to be emphasized over creed. The other Universalist part of our faith emphasized God's saving love for all people, regardless of creed.

Centuries later, it's not surprising that today's Unitarian Universalists aspire to be open to wisdom from any religion that inspires us in our ethical and spiritual lives, whether it is found in the Torah, the Bhagavad Gita, the Gospels or the Qur'an. We are similarly open to the wisdom that each of us brings as a result of our lived experiences, and we strive to help one another in figuring out for ourselves what it is that we believe about God, life, family, community, learning and service.

We are truly blessed to live in a nation that not only allows for such freedom of religion, but actively seeks a diversity of voices in order that our union may be more perfect. While agreement is a nice thing, of course, it is actually disagreement that allows for growth — but it must be disagreement that we employ in healthy ways. The increasingly strident voices that call for forced agreement, for the elimination of all other voices that express differing beliefs, are a disease, a sickness that afflicts our social body — and sometimes our human lives.

A little over two years ago, for example, a man with a shotgun entered one of our sister congregations in Knoxville, a man intent, according to the letter he left in his vehicle, on killing as many "liberals" as possible before the police killed him. Thankfully the children who were to participate in the service that morning were rushed to safety, but an usher and a visitor were shot and killed, and six other adults were wounded by the gunman. While this terrible event could have scared the congregation into closing its doors in a futile attempt at self-protection, it did precisely the opposite, strengthening its resolve to be as open as possible. In re-dedicating its church sanctuary, the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation also re-committed itself to the theological imperative summarized on its sign: "Everyone Welcome."

My congregation has similar words displayed on its sign on Warwick Boulevard: "All Are Welcome." Those are easy words to say, but truly living by them certainly isn't easy. With the resurgence of interest in spirituality in recent years, there's come a recognition that true hospitality — radical hospitality, as named in the Benedictine tradition — is sufficiently demanding to be a spiritual practice that takes work and discipline. What's more, in working at being welcoming we necessarily risk more than our psychological comfort. There's

risk in being willing to be open and accepting of the stranger, the unknown, the different other, but this is the call of our faith, our trust in our common humanity and in God's saving love for all people, regardless of creed.

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