

Side by Side by the Seaside
Rev. David A. Morris
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
July 22, 2018

Well, it's about the middle of summer, or at least of the summer season that runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and I'd say that we're just about at Peak Interaction among the communities that share space here in the Outer Banks. The roads are as busy as they get, the lines are long, the Early Bird Specials are in full bloom. The pirate boats and dolphin watch pontoons and the fishing charters are afloat, sharing space with the shrimpers and crabbers and the commercial boats trying to keep those restaurant tables full of good food. The beaches near town smell like coconut oil and French fries and the four-wheel drive areas are a little like a drive-in theater with one row of parking and a really, really wide screen.

If you or someone you live with works in any aspect of hospitality, or retail, or making art, or at the hospital, or anywhere that has anything to do with customers, these are probably your most full days of the year. If you have a business that depends on visitors, you're watching and hoping this summer is going to be one of the good ones. If you're visiting you're probably spending every precious hour trying to get the most out of everything that brought you here, or that brings you back here year after year.

If you work at something that doesn't change all that much with the seasons, or if you're just trying to run a household, if this is just where you live and the rhythm of your life is built around going to school, work, concerts, meetings, the grocery store, and maybe a little golf or fishing or beach walking, you're probably using all your skills at calculating departure times or jockeying for position in the checkout line about now.

As much as we recognize that we all depend on each other to make this community of ours thrive, and to make this the place we love to live OR to visit, things can get a little testy when we're all up against each other this time of year. We can divide ourselves mentally into groups competing for time and space, with the other group or groups rather annoyingly insisting on doing things wrong, or at least not the way we would like. When the minutes tick away and you get later and later for that meeting you were sure you left enough extra time to get to, the extra cars on the bypass can feel less like a hopeful sign for the local economy and more like a highly effective blood pressure elevator.

On the other side of things, when it's six people deep at the cash register, and the toddler's hungry and the tide's coming in and you can't remember if you pulled the chairs and towels back away from the waterline before you left the beach to shop for just a little while, then the fact that the sales clerk takes a few minutes to chat person-to-person with every customer can seem less like a charming feature of Outer Banks hospitality and more like a purposeful assault on your sanity.

These people, we can start to think, no matter which group we happen to belong to.

These people don't care about keeping the beach clean.

These people don't understand how to deal with the sun, or how to swim safely.

These people don't respect that we have a right to be here too.

These people act like they own the place.

These people don't care how long it takes for me to shop in their store.

These people don't know how to drive (this is a popular local favorite on Facebook, although I need to point out that the last person I saw drive for a quarter of a mile at 50 miles an hour in the center turn lane had OBX on their license tag).

It's a good time to take a step back. Not to retreat from each other into separate spaces, as if that were possible, but to take a breath and step back from our identification of the troublesome groups, and our assumption that we know all we need to know about "these people," whoever they happen to be for us. We don't actually know who "these people" are.

I was struck by this awareness back in March, when we had the March for Our Lives rally for safe schools and sensible gun law reform. As three or four hundred local people crossed the bypass with the police stopping traffic for us, as we walked along the busy road with our signs and chants, as dozens of drivers honked, or waved, or gave us thumbs-up or thumbs-down salutes, it suddenly occurred to me that some of those folks might be genuinely surprised to see us out there.

Some of them, I thought, were probably just annoyed that traffic got held up for five minutes as we crossed, and had no idea what we were doing. But how many of them might have been astonished that the same issues which raise such fierce passion in the rest of the country are present right here, in their vacation paradise? How many were delighted to see us, and on the other hand how many were dismayed to think that there's no escape, even here, from the ordinary dangers and disagreements going on all over the U.S.? How many were taken aback that their neighbors and the young people in our schools felt so strongly about something that happened way down in some suburb of Miami? How many might even have been just a little surprised, because it never really occurred to them that this place they experience as a playground actually has schools, and that those schools have the same issues as everywhere else?

In that moment it seemed to me that all too often we live parallel lives, in which the other people around us are just the background, the context for whatever story or life experience we happen to be living at the moment. We're side by side, but we're not really having the same moment. It's so easy to forget that the people in our background, or in our *way*, are really human beings, like us, with their own stories and struggles and trials and triumphs. It's all too easy for them to become "these people," who don't really matter.

I think this Peak Interaction Season is an especially good opportunity for us to practice the spiritual discipline of recognizing each other as fully worthy, fully *real* human beings. It's a good time to be curious about each other, to wonder what that person I'm feeling so impatient or annoyed with right this moment is actually feeling, what they're experiencing right now. I already know what I want from my Outer Banks home, what I get from living here. What are they getting, what are they hoping to find here in this very same place, which they're encountering so differently from the way I do?

The story in our Time for All Ages about the group of friends learning that they need each other in order to discover the true, complicated reality of the Elephant is a reminder that we need more than our own perspective in order to know the truth about anything in this multi-faceted world we inhabit.

I remember when I lived in New York City how much I enjoyed taking visitors around to see the city I'd grown used to living in. Like any good New Yorker, there were things I *never* did there—go up in the Empire State Building, visit the huge Diego Rivera murals in Rockefeller Center, ride the ferry to the Statue of Liberty—except when I had visitors. Then, for a few days, I would experience *my* city through *their* senses, their excitement, their awe at things I'd stopped really noticing. It was a revelation, and it reminded me of my own delight in where I lived.

For those of us who live here and can sometimes get frustrated when our experience doesn't quite match our imagination of the way things used to be, or could be, it's good to be reminded that the way things are right now is still pretty wonderful to someone.

Whether you're a lover of the quiet off-season months, feeling besieged by the busy-ness and the faster pace of our summer visitor season, or a visitor with a lot on your one-week agenda, feeling bemused by local folks who insist that Island Time is just the way things are, there are some practices that might help us let go of the tension of the moment and allow ourselves to be informed by each other's perspective and experience.

We can reflect on the gift of living at the crossroads as we do, a place that brings so many people together for so many different reasons. There are so many people to meet, so much life to learn about.

We can reflect on the benefit of the busy-ness that represents a good season for local businesses and people, not because of some abstract economic calculus but because of the real impact it has on the lives of people among us who live at the margins of sustainability. The crowds that drive us crazy might just mean that someone we know makes it through another lean winter with shelter and heat and enough to eat.

We can reflect on our own good fortune in being here—whether we're a birthright Outer Banker, a newer year-round resident, a snow-bird, or a drop-in who's been waiting all year to be here. How lucky are we, to be right here, right now, in this place where so many want to come?

We can reflect on the immense, intense geographical reality that is our everyday environment—the Sounds and marshes and ocean and shores all teeming with life, the endless rhythm of the tides, the cleansing power of what the poet called the “liquid rim” where land and sea blend into one another. In the vast context of that immensity, in the balm and solace of all the beauty and power which is at the heart of what draws everybody here, perhaps we can let go of our frustrations over our differences and remember to meet one another in curiosity and compassion.

It’s a good spiritual practice for us. It’s a practice with a larger purpose, too, because we’re living in a time when powerful forces in American public life are trying to teach us to look at each other and at the rest of the world with suspicion and hostility, as competitors and enemies and threats. It’s vital that we learn, and relearn, and practice at every opportunity to expand our capacity to meet at the margins of our differences. It’s vital that we learn to find common ground, common cause, and insight into each other’s lives.

It’s vitally important that we take every chance to practice drawing the circle of community and inclusion, the circle of love, wider and wider.

May we be the ones to make it so.