

Building the World We Dream About
Rev. Kathleen Owens
September 30, 2007

“Steve Austin: astronaut. A man barely alive.”

“Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology. We have the capability to make the world’s first bionic man. Steve Austin will be that man. Better than he was before. Better...stronger...faster.”

Perhaps some of you recognize those words – they opened *The Six Million Dollar Man* – a television show back in the 1970s. Unfortunately I couldn't quite capture the intensity and tenor of the voice of the actor – whom we never saw speak those words – all we saw (from my memory and the Wikipedia information) were images of an astronaut involved in an aircraft crash and then a body being operated on. The mood was intense and serious...and as a kid I was fascinated by the thought that science could rebuild a man. If that was possible, then wow, nothing seemed out of reach. Sometimes I miss the innocence and unquestioning sureness that anything was possible – that sureness that was untouched by reality.

Apparently some of you miss and crave that as well – and I say that based on the number of signups and inquiries we have had regarding the new curriculum we are field testing this year – *Building the World We Dream* (even though the English teacher in me longs to call it, *Building the World About Which We Dream*). About 27 people have signed up for the Wednesday night class and 23 people have signed up for Saturday's class. We had to close the groups last week and still some have asked about joining. This is a new curriculum – a "welcoming congregation" curriculum on race and ethnicity developed for our congregations. These groups are now closed and I apologize to those of

you who couldn't join the class, I know the work that will happen will not remain in those classes. The work that happens, and there will be work, will in truth filter out, ripple out beyond the bounds of the class and into the greater congregation. I know it because it is the nature of the work.

Why this curriculum – why now? Because the truth is we haven't made a better human being – at least not through science or technology. I do believe we have through this faith...and we have room to grow. Though our faith tradition has a long history as individual faith identities, Unitarians and Universalists formally merged in 1961. In those years when parts of our society were in turmoil – when freedom was both a noun and a verb – a tangible force, in the streets, something we march and fought for...the two faith traditions merged into one. From that time to the present our faith has wrestled with, pondered, fought over and tried to educate itself and our members on racial issues and how to be open to diversity. Just now we are beginning to harvest the fruits of the labors of African American Unitarian and Universalist ministers from the early 1900s. Forty plus years ago, though, we have made mistakes, big and small, and sometimes it has felt we have made some progress in a few places, only to realize we have barely started the work that is needed. I was listening to a radio program the other day and the interviewer was discussing filmmaker Ken Burns' documentary *The War* and the controversy surrounding it. The guest on the show made a statement that has stayed with me – he said, Ken Burns makes good films and he's great making them in black and white – but he doesn't see people of color. Our faith tradition, in many ways, has been making progress in seeing the world, our community in black and white – and I think we too

don't see people of color. Like the fictional character Steve Austin, this part of our community – this segment of our being, this part of our body can seem barely alive.

About the same time The Bionic Man was activated and solving crimes, various congregations within our faith tradition were beginning to welcome people who identified as gay or lesbian. Clergy blessed same-gender couples in their ceremonies of union and many churches have become more inclusive. We are now consciously aware of welcoming people who identify as bisexual and transgender. And we still have room to grow. For some of us hearing the many descriptors before a noun in the words of welcome is tiresome, can sound like we are trying to be politically correct and some of us wonder why can't we just say people and move on. And now, we want to be liberal and well-meaning but marriage equality can feel like too much – like we've just gone too far. Why aren't domestic partnerships enough? Why can't 'you' just be satisfied with that – why isn't it enough?

A month into my ministry here a person came in to talk with me, unsure if this was the spiritual home they had been seeking. Through our conversation this person came out – as a member of the working poor, a person who couldn't pledge and couldn't believe that this community would be welcoming. When I expressed how much this individual had to offer and to receive, it was very difficult - how this could be a safe and accepting space. Or what about the person who says to me, welcoming congregation – right...the church has programs at night I can't attend because I can't drive and rides are hard to come by...sure, call yourself welcoming...for those who can get there.

You know, of course that our congregation is a mirror of the larger community out there. And given the scenarios, it can feel like we, like our world, has barely survived

a crash. In truth, we are barely alive when we are separated into the –isms of our society; racism, ableism, age-ism and others, the –isms that try to isolate us, that keep us from communicating, that keep us in resentment and bitterness because that group gets more attention than my group does. "What can they do to you?" asks the poet Marge Piercy. "Whatever they want. They can set you up, they can bust you, they can break your fingers, ... blur you with drugs till you can't walk, can't remember, they can take your child, wall up your lover. They can do anything you can't stop them from doing. How can you stop them? Alone, you can fight, you can refuse, you can take what revenge you can but they roll over you."¹

That piece of poetry is powerful and scary – and it doesn't end there. That was just the first stanza. The second stanza starts with the word 'But'...that word gives me hope – for it means there is something more – there is, like in our first reading, a Some Day, a future tense. What is the world we dream about? What is it that keeps you up at night working for more than what we currently have? What is dream you have that keeps you pushing onward – in spite of what you see around you? What is the dream you have for this world that is barely alive?

My dream is for a world that is healthy – whose rivers run and run clean. Whose air is breathable, 365 days a year. My dream for this community is that we will see in bold, Technicolor – all the colors of the human family gathered together; with people in conversation where there is no fear of saying something wrong or unintentionally offending others; of conversations with all of us where we think out carefully what we will say, maybe even hear it inside our heads – to see if it might hurt someone before speaking the words aloud; my dream is for all of us to be welcoming and inclusive – for

¹ "The low road" by Marge Piercy, (first stanza). *Cries of the Spirit*, page 170.

all, regardless of their gender, regardless of their sexual orientation or who they love; my dream is to live in a world where every citizen has the same rights as every other person regardless of love, skin, education, age, ability, class or wealth. My dream is that every program here offers childcare so that all may participate – that we see the children and youth here as belonging to all of us therefore we tend and care for them, regardless of who their biological parents are; my dream is that we care for one another in such a way that there are more rides offered than are needed; that everyone has filled out an Emergency Contact form so we know how to proceed if something happens unexpectedly (and those forms are available on the Caring table outside); my dream is that we live together with the awareness that diversity does mean strength and beauty, wonder and awe and that we can learn to be respectful without judgment. My dream is for peace – for all of us in our lives.

Here's the hope in that poem, that second stanza that may be familiar to some of you. "But two people fighting back to back can cut through a mob...two people can keep each other sane, can give support, conviction, love, massage, hope, sex. Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge. With four you can play bridge and start an organization. With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fund raising party. A dozen make a demonstration. A hundred fill a hall. A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter; ten thousand, power and your own paper; a hundred thousand, your own media; ten million, your own country."² It starts with two people – or three or six. It starts from the need to speak, to celebrate, to seek forgiveness. Two people offer hope.

One of the hard questions is how. HOW do we build the world we dream about?

² Ibid., stanza two-four, page 171.

We do not build it through organizational charts or committees; we do not build it by marching on the streets or attending a lecture; it doesn't happen through task force groups or self-esteem seminars, we do not build it through science or technology. We build it through theology – the theology of relationships. I think, no, I believe, no... I **know** we build the world we dream about through the sharing of our stories, through living in community and staying at the table when it is difficult. Though there are others steps, this is the foundational one.

A true story – at a different Unitarian Universalist church. The atmosphere at the board meeting was tense and there were visitors, waiting to hear how the board would handle the conflict. The congregation wasn't divided but a few powerful members were unsure about the direction the congregation seemed to be heading. Finally, after the minutes were approved and the treasure's report given and accepted, the real conversation began with a church elder saying, "I am opposed to becoming a welcoming congregation. I don't know those people – who knows what they would do up in the balcony!" Some people laughed, some were embarrassed and some agreed with him. His pain and worry were evident in his face. He clearly was in distress over this issue. I sat in the visitor section waiting to see what the board would do. I was the only out lesbian, the only known homosexual in the church; I had been in the church for a little more than a year, I think. I participated in social justice, worked on the rummage sale, participated in worship services, the women's circle and I pledged. The church was my spiritual home - it was also the only safe place in public where I could truly be all of myself. The room quieted down as another board member raised her hand to be acknowledged. She was a long-time pillar of the church and though I worked with her and was acquainted with her,

I didn't really know her – we weren't friends. The board president called on her to speak – she looked around the room and then said, "I too have concerns about what we're considering. I have worked too long here for us to be known as the gay church, and I don't know 'those people.' But," she said, looking and pointing her finger directly at me, "I know you – and I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt this church – so I support us becoming a welcoming congregation." How do we build the world we dream about – one relationship at a time. We do it through intentional acts of community building; of taking the risks to live beyond the –isms that have kept us isolated, that have encouraged fear of others, of doing something new or different. This new anti-racist, anti-oppression curriculum we are field testing is called a welcoming congregation curriculum because we've experienced success with another curriculum called The Welcoming Congregation. That first curriculum helped us learn to be more welcoming to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. The second version of the curriculum was written in such a way that participants shared their lives, through stories and experiences within the context of our faith and in so doing, we became known to one another – recognizing the truth of our seventh principle – that we are all connected and belong together in the web of life. As a faith tradition we have become far more welcoming to folks who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender than most other segments of our community. So this new curriculum on race and ethnicity is written in a similar way with the expectation of a similar success.

Did you hear I mentioned the second version? I did so because when the first version of The Welcoming Congregation came out, it was written with a bias that straight people just needed to listen up and learn from queer folks; it was assumed that straight

folks had a lot to learn and once they heard it from the queer community, it would be okay. It wasn't. Similar to white guilt in earlier editions of anti-racism curricula in years past, being lectured to, and trying to learn in an environment that depended on guilt does not create real and lasting relationships or change. In this new curriculum, we all, white, black, brown, red, yellow – and all the in between versions/shades, we all have work to do. And the work is done in an atmosphere of respect, not fear of saying the wrong thing, it's done within the context of our faith and from a place of wanting real community and a world that doesn't separate each other.

The final stanza of the poem – "It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act, it starts when you do it again after they (the isms) say no, it starts when you say, We and know who you mean and each day you mean one more." I add that it is done in such a way that we will begin creating the world for which we yearn. Some day, Hallelujah, the work we do now will create a better world for every one.

Our planet, it is a world that is hurting, barely alive amidst the poverty, the war, the homelessness, the –isms, the melting ice caps and dry riverbeds. People of faith, we can rebuild it. We have the theology, the courage, the love, the patience and the strength to make a better world. Better than it was before, more than it used to be – a world that is fair and all her people one. May it be so. Blessed be.