

## **“Welcome is a verb”**

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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

[Begin with this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEIQOiks6Js>]

I love this video of Lavender D’Arcangelo and her “Golden Buzzer” moment. I confess, I am not a regular, or even occasional viewer of America’s Got Talent, but I watched this one because Lavender’s father, Will, is a ministerial colleague, serving our congregation in Framingham, Massachusetts.

I have shared it with a number of people since it aired last month, and I am consistently reduced to a sloppy, crying mess every time.

There is a lot going on in this video.

We are introduced to Lavender, who is led out on stage by her father Will. She shares with host Simon Cowell that she is autistic as well as blind, and that she plans to sing.

Her dad Will is introduced, somewhat awkwardly, and we get a glimpse of how their relationship began – He was running an after-school music program for students and young adults in his area.

We see occasional glimpses of Will’s husband Jamie, sitting in the audience. He is, by all accounts, adorable in his pride and nervousness and love for Lavender.

Lavender begins to sing, and we are treated to her truly amazing voice.

We see audience members, Lavender’s dads, the backstage guy Terry Crews, and the panel of judges, including Simon Cowell, Heidi Klum, Sofia Vergara, and Howie Mandell, all responding with rapt emotion to her performance.

When she is done, the audience gives her a standing ovation, and Will comes back out on the stage to be with her. Host Sofia Vergara is seen wiping away tears, and host Simon Cowell, once considered the meanest guy on television for his vicious take-downs of contestants, seems slack jawed and unable to say much more than “unbelievable.”

And then the video does some radical accessibility and justice work, without ever announcing “Hey! We’re gonna be all woke now and make people mad!”

Howie Mandell tells Lavender that everyone was standing and applauding. Without making a big deal about it, he makes the experience accessible to Lavender.

The conversation goes back and forth between Lavender and Will and the judges. Not once does anyone say anything about Lavender’s rocking posture, or the cadence of her speech, both behaviors common to autistic people. It wasn’t part of her talent, it didn’t affect how she performed, so it was a non-issue. It was just part of her and was accepted without comment.

We do see Will explaining quietly to Lavender that the gold confetti is falling all around after Heidi Klum hits the golden buzzer, but again, that’s not a thing that merits mention. It is simply adaptive support, and natural.

For those who don’t know, the Golden Buzzer is awarded to individual acts that impress the judges such that a judge can catapult them over all of the intermediate levels of the competition and straight to the big semi-final round of performers. No more regionals, no more giant charts like the NCAA basketball playoffs, she just gets to show up at the end and take her place among the semi-finalists.

I think each host is permitted one golden buzzer choice per season, so it’s a big deal when they award one.

There are the expected amount of tears and applause, Heidi Klum comes up on stage for hugs and more tears, and everybody is happy.

Then Klum says “where is your amazing husband? There he is! This is a family show, come on up here!”

And there is more confetti, more cheering, more hugs and more tears.

Again, Heidi explains to Lavender “I’m giving you a box with all the confetti from the stage.”

Accessibility modeled by a supermodel, without comment, awkwardness, or anything else.

In the calm after the storm, Lavender captures the emotion of her experience, describing how she didn't know who she was supposed to be or where she was supposed to be, but now she knows. She's here, doing this, with her dads, and belonging.

September is the time of year when Unitarian Universalist congregations come back together after the summer months and begin a new church year. It is when we fuss around in the building, making sure everything is ready and welcoming for when people come back.

Our Soul Matters theme for September is, appropriately, "Welcoming."

Welcoming can take a lot of shapes and forms. Like we just witnessed, welcoming can mean making things accessible for everyone, regardless of ability or capacity. It is why we maintain our online worship community, because it makes us available to those who cannot attend in person. It is why we have spaces in our sanctuary seating arrangement for wheelchairs, in case that space is needed.

Religious Educator and Consultant CB Beal talks about "pre-emptive radical inclusion" as a practice of making things accessible before there is a need for them. Like having a ramp and designated handicapped parking as a matter of course. Like using microphones so everyone can hear, including those online. Its like how we make ingredient lists on our shared potluck food items. It is why we are now using pronouns and physical descriptions when we are at the microphone, so that people who are visually disabled or blind can have an idea of what we look like, like those who can see.

Welcome is linked closely with belonging, and therapists and doctors will tell you that connection and belonging are absolutely key to mental health and to treatment for addiction. Connection and belonging are absolutely life-giving, even life-saving things. We as a church are positioned to offer a unique kind of welcome that other entities are not. Offices and businesses are required by law to be accessible to folks with a variety of disabilities and differences, but as a religious community, we have an obligation to make ourselves accessible to people's hearts as well as their bodies.

In conversations recently with members of the Welcoming team – those folks who welcome new folks and get them nametags and resources and such – we talked about how to deepen our welcome beyond the typical questions asked of a newcomer: what's your name, where do you live, have you been to a UU church before, how did you learn about us, do you sing, what do you do for work?

Those are all good questions, but they are not terribly deep. They're the sort of questions you answer when you're filling out a form. They don't encourage a ton of connection or conversation.

So how do we welcome others in a way that connects them to this place and these people?

One of the ways we can do that is through asking open-ended questions about interesting things.

What brings you joy?

What is a boring but unique fact about you?

What feeds your spirit?

Tell me about your journey.

And then, friends, we must listen. Do not ask big questions if you want a three-word answer. Be prepared to stay present and listen to what your new friend is telling you. This is how we make connections on a Sunday morning that will last through the week and through the years.

Think about your own story of finding Unitarian Universalism. Every one of us who came here from somewhere else has a story about the first time they knew they belonged in a UU congregation. It usually goes something like this:

At first it was strange, the hymns were all different, and the readings were not from the bible. The things they said felt amazing but unsettling. Then someone said or did something special that made me feel welcome. Seen. Understood. Accepted. Whole. Loved.

One woman described being a single mom to two small children and an elder couple invited her and the kids to dinner. After dinner, she was chatting with the matriarch and noticed nobody had seen or heard the children for a while – one was two and the other five. In the study, she found them, the eldest playing quietly on the carpeted floor, while the

toddler slept soundly on the also snoozing patriarch, reclined in his chair. She said she knew then that that church welcomed all of her, including her children.

You may have noticed the large chalkboard area at the back of the sanctuary towards the rear of the building. This month's question was about welcome – what is it that makes you feel welcome? The responses written there are thought-provoking and poignant. I encourage you to take a look at the board and perhaps write a response of your own as well. A new question will go up in October.

Exercise: I am going to ask you to do a thing that may be deeply challenging. I want you to look around the room and find someone that you perhaps do not know well, or who is new to you. No family members!!

I want you to gain consent to engage them in conversation, and then I want you to take a couple minutes to find out more about this person. And not just where they live or what they do, but things like what brings you joy? What makes your spirit peaceful? Tell me a weird but boring fact about you.

Let's take five minutes or so to have those conversations. Five minutes is not an unbearable amount of time.

I'm going to ask Alex to put our zoom attendants into one or two breakout rooms so they can have those conversations.

I'll let you know when we're halfway through and when we are out of time by ringing the bell.

I want to thank you for being brave and willing to participate in this conversation.

After the service, during our potluck lunch, I want to encourage folks to continue this practice. Find someone you do not know closely and introduce yourself. Ask about the things that are important to them, and then listen.

Welcome is not just a thing we print on words on a doormat, nor is it simply a rainbow sticker we put on our sign or building. Welcome is a verb – it

requires action. It requires us to go beyond inviting in, to reach out to others. It is easy to invite someone to your house, but it takes more emotional energy to leave your own comfort zone and go out. Let's learn to reach out more, to learn about people and connect on a level that goes beyond surface stuff. It is when our hearts can speak to each other that we form emotional bonds that will last for years.

Welcome means being prepared for people before they arrive, and being prepared to accept and love people as they show up. Like the way America's Got Talent welcomed Lavender. It was natural, seemingly without effort. But you and I both know that it takes intention and dedication to make a place ready for that kind of welcome.

To update Lavender's story, after this broadcast, she went on to the semi-finals at the big filming place in Pasadena, where she won again, putting her into the final round with ten other acts. The final contest will be held on two nights – September 26 and 27, and she will perform again then.

The winner will be chosen not by the panel of four judges, but by viewers who call in and vote for the contestant of their choice. The voting will begin on the 26<sup>th</sup> and the results will be announced during the broadcast on the 27<sup>th</sup>. For those who want to watch the finals, the program is on at 8 pm on NBC. Those are Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

This is not a heavy sermon week. I am not asking you to tip your server 50%. I am not asking you to reverse global warming. I am asking you to reach out a little, and learn about one another. To welcome each other into your hearts in new ways.

May this be our practice and our prayer, on this day and every day.

Amen.