

# Engaging the Stranger

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The Reverend Heather Janules  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
Bethesda, Maryland

**Reading** “Speaking to the Locks” by Meg Barnhouse (Abridged)

“Our locks tell us a lot about our lives. Locks of all kinds hold my attention because of a dream I had when I was thirteen. In the dream a gray-haired woman in a white coat sat behind a desk. I knew she was me, far in the future. Behind her on the wall was a cross-stitched sampler with a motto. I wish to this day that I could remember what it said. The words were the most beautiful I had ever heard or read...In another dream, I saw a photograph of the same woman in a newspaper clipping. The caption below her picture is all I remember. In bold type, it read, “Speaking to the Locks.”

I woke up knowing what I was supposed to do with my life. I was going to “speak to the locks.” The phrase has been my guide over the years. Its meaning continues to become clearer as the years go by.

At a party once, I was telling a friend about Ike’s, a restaurant in a neighborhood by the railroad tracks. Ike’s serves the best chili cheeseburger in the state. From the outside it looks like a dive. But inside you might see the mayor, construction work crews, college professors and bikers with jailhouse tattoos. You would also see black, white and Hispanic people, a mix you don’t see many places around here.

My friend jumped in: ‘I know just where that neighborhood is! My mother used to make us lock the car doors when we drove through there, and she would step on the gas to get through fast...We were supposed to lock the doors by sneaking our finger up to the button and pressing it down gently so it didn’t make noise. My sister would lunge across the seat and pound the lock down, and Mama would hiss at her, “Not that

way, you’ll hurt their feelings!”

In my old suburban neighborhood I was street captain one year, which meant I had to go door-to-door collecting dues. I rang the bell, and in a minute I heard locks being unlocked from the inside, sometimes two or three of them. People cracked open the door enough to look out fearfully with one eye. They watched too much TV. I couldn’t figure out why else they would imagine that there were roving gangs of folks out to invade our homes.

My friend Jake lives in a downtown neighborhood that is bad by anyone’s standards. He sees a couple of crack houses from his front yard. Yet, he told me that on several occasions, he has gone camping and left the front door open for twenty-four hours.

“Open, like unlocked?” I ask.

“No,” he said, “standing wide open. Nothing inside was touched.” In Spartanburg County you mostly have to look out for being shot or stabbed by someone in your own family. No one bothers strangers much.

Here is what I’m thinking. We’re scared of the wrong things. We lock our car doors and take our kids home to where the guns are. We tell them all about being wary of pedophile strangers and we forget to tell them about protecting themselves from uncles and cousins. We don’t let our neighbors into our lives so there is no one to turn to when we’re in trouble. We’re scared of people, don’t want to know them, and worry that they want to rob or rape us, but we don’t want to hurt their feelings.

Isolation is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us alone. Ignorance is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us at home, associating only with folks of our same nationality, class and color. Looking like a fool is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us silent when we should speak up and make us talk too much when we should be quiet, so we end up looking like fools after all. Our fears keep us from bending, growing, changing in a supple way. Our fears lock us down into a narrowness of experience that sucks the marrow from our bones and leaves us dried-up husks in safe homes with satisfactory retirement funds.

Yeah, we're scared of all the wrong things."

### **Sermon**

When I opened my office door one Sunday morning in Winter, I was greeted by a flashing red light on my telephone, telling me I had a message. When I listened to the message, I learned that it was from our member, Deborah Vollmer. She called me with this question:

I just came back from the Bethesda Post Office. I went there to mail a letter and I found two homeless men sleeping near the mailboxes. I'm not sure what I should do. They don't seem to be doing any harm or bothering anyone. One of them moved out of the way politely when I needed to get to the mailbox. But I'm not sure. With all the talk about terrorism, the mail system is vulnerable to attack. Should I call the police? What should I do?

Our voicemail system registers the time that we receive each phone call. By the time I had gotten Deborah's message, it was about an hour after she left it. It was too late to call her back as I assumed that, by then, she had made her decision.

I saw Deborah later that morning and she told me that, not knowing how to respond, she hadn't called the authorities. "I noticed," she said, "that there is a police station across the street from the post office. Maybe the police and these homeless men have an understanding about sleeping in the post office. Maybe they have worked something out."

Maybe they have, I thought.

But this question stayed with Deborah after this experience. Should she have called the police or not? Living with this question inspired Deborah to bid for the right to dictate the subject of one of my sermons at our 2006 Mardi Gras Auction. She was the highest bidder and so I was invited to return to this question with greater depth. She may have won the sermon but I have received a great gift in the form of this assignment.

Deborah's question is a specific one, in response to a specific life

experience. Yet, for me, it raises a larger question: How do we engage with strangers in our modern world?

While reflecting on this question, I have returned to two experiences from my own life that taught me lessons about the world we live in and dealing with people we don't know.

The home I grew up in is a small, white farm house in suburban New Hampshire. The word "suburban" is misleading as the cities around us were much smaller than the cities in this region. When my parents first bought our house, it was just about the last house before the paved road ended and dirt road began, weaving through fields and thick forest. Developers were busy building modern single-family homes in this forest but we were still surrounded by woods and farm land.

One night, when I was about ten years old, I heard a knock at the door. It was a rare thing for anyone to knock on our door and it was especially strange to hear a knock so late at night.

When I heard the knock, I was frightened. I don't remember where my father was, for a time he worked the night shift at his job, but I remember knowing that it was just me, a ten-year-old girl, and her mother on this dark country road. Who could be at the door?

"Mom, there is someone at the door," I said. The look on my mother's face told me she wasn't sure what to do either.

Through some silent agreement, inching forward side-by-side in our nightgowns, we decided to open the door together. When we opened the door, a woman stood before us in the yellow glow of the porch light. She was sweaty and frazzled, her hair a tangled mass on her head. We waited for her to speak.

"May I come in?" she said. "I've taken a beating." My mother ordered me to go upstairs to my room and she let the woman inside. I tried to listen to their conversation through the heating grate but all I heard were the muffled sounds of two women speaking quietly at the kitchen table.

The next day, I heard the whole story from my mother. The woman lived

down the dirt road with her boyfriend in a trailer. The boyfriend had a history of physically abusing her. That night, he attacked her again and she ran away. Our house was the only house with lights on so that is why she came to our door. From our house, she made arrangements to spend the night in a shelter for battered women.

My mother worried that after spending a night in the shelter, this woman would return to her abusive boyfriend. But there was no way we could make this decision for her. We never saw this woman again so we never learned what happened to her. Every time we passed her trailer, I remembered the night she came to our door and hoped she no longer lived there.

The other experience that came to mind in response to the question of dealing with strangers happened much more recently. In my last year of seminary, I worked as an administrative assistant for the office of the Central Midwest District of the Unitarian Universalist Association, an organization now led by Cedar Lane member Ian Evison. Our office supported the work of nearly 80 Unitarian Universalist congregations in our region.

One day, we got a call from a minister who served a church in Wisconsin. She had very troubling news.

It was the middle of the week. Unlike Cedar Lane, this church was mostly empty every day except for Sunday morning. The church's administrator had been working alone in the office when a man came to the door. She recognized him as he had been coming to worship services for the past couple weeks.

Her friendly greeting melted away when she noticed that he held a knife in his hand. The man ordered her to enter the church kitchen. It was there, on the large kitchen counter, that he assaulted her. As she lay bruised and despondent after the assault, the man returned to the church office, grabbed her purse, withdrew her car keys and drove away in her car.

It took the police only a short amount of time to find and apprehend the

man but it was too late. The wounding was done. Both the soul of the church administrator and the sense of the church as a sanctuary for the community were violated. That Sunday, the congregation reclaimed their sacred space through a service of rededication. As we did this morning, the first hymn they sang was "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door."

These two experiences illustrate a few truths about dealing with strangers. My experience with the woman who came to our door late at night reminds us that sometimes welcoming the stranger is the right thing to do, even when we are uncertain of their motives. And the experience of the woman who came to us reminds us that sometimes it is the people we know well who pose the greatest risk to our safety and not the stranger at all.

Yet, the story about the assault and robbery in the Unitarian Universalist church in Wisconsin reminds us that we live in a dangerous world where sometimes it is appropriate to fear the unknown. Places that should be safe—homes, churches, post offices—are vulnerable to violation.

I was reminded of this truth the first time I used today's reading, "Speaking to the Locks," in church life. I read these words at the beginning of an adult religious education class, before we engaged in conversation about dealing with difference in community. As I read Meg Barnhouse's words, I began feeling more and more uncomfortable. At the point where I got to the words, "We're scared of the wrong things," I realized how hard it was to believe this idea in the same week when Cho Seung-Hui shot and killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech.

These truths underscore the difficulty of the question Deborah has raised. We have a religious responsibility to welcome and care for the stranger in need. We also have a responsibility to care for ourselves and the people we are charged to protect, like our children. Should Deborah have found some food for the men sleeping in the post office? Or should she have called the police so they would leave?

As we engage with these questions, I am mindful of the tools we have to negotiate our boundaries with the outside world—doors and locks. There was a door between me and my mother and the woman who stood on our porch. There was a lock on the church office door that could have been

engaged as the administrator worked alone. There are ways that we can keep ourselves safe in a world of uncertainty and potential danger.

And we have another tool that guides us in how we engage the stranger—our intellectual reason. In each encounter, we have the ability to think through the potential risks and benefits of making ourselves vulnerable to the unknown.

My reason tells me that Meg Barnhouse's friend Jake, who lives in a dangerous neighborhood and leaves his door wide open when he goes out-of-town, is taking unnecessary risks with his home. Here at Cedar Lane, we use our collective reason to ensure that our church and its people are safe. We have a large crew of volunteer security officers who come by the church every evening, after all the meetings are done, to close the windows, turn off the lights and lock all the doors. We have an active Safety Committee that creates church practices that guard the physical and personal safety of all members of our community. As a staff, we have fostered an office culture where we make sure that no one is left alone in the building and, if we are working when the church is very quiet, we shut and lock our doors so we are not vulnerable to visitors with malevolent intentions. These practices are the results of a community thinking cooperatively and collectively about how we, as a religious institution, remain accessible to the public while not taking unnecessary risks.

But the tools we have to navigate these boundaries are imperfect. Every circumstance is different and so much is unknown. Reason only takes us so far in determining what to do; there is no guarantee that we will make the right decision. As well, no lock or door ultimately ensures our safety.

There is another danger in this question of dealing with strangers—the risk of building our own prisons. Greater security means taller fences, stronger bolts, bars on the window between us and the world at large. Along with the risk of leaving ourselves vulnerable to harm, there is also the risk of becoming so fearful of others that we become isolated from other people, suspicious of everyone we meet. It was hard to read Meg Barnhouse's reflection right after the Virginia Tech massacre but I know that she is right when she affirms that "isolation is greatly to be feared, but our fears keep us alone."

So how do we engage with strangers in our modern world? In response to Deborah's excellent question, out of my life experience and the wisdom of those around me, I believe we should approach the stranger with both generosity and self-preservation. Our intuition and our intellect, innate gifts of the human spirit, often tell us how much we must temper our openness to survive. There is no guarantee that we will make the right choice but we have the faculties to choose well.

And, so, in response to Deborah's initial question, it was appropriate to let the men sleep in the post office. It was cold outside and they were doing no harm. The police were just a short distance away. This was the generous action to take.

And generous we must be. The world's great religious traditions, including our own, charge us with the responsibilities of service and hospitality. The natural result of faithful dedication to this religious mandate is an inherent trust in our fellow humans. We are called to adopt such an assumption of trust, such a Universalist faith in the goodness of our neighbors.

When it comes to dealing with strangers, when our reason tells us that there are no obvious risks, we must give the stranger the benefit of the doubt. The dismantling of our suspicious and fearful culture must begin somewhere. Dismantling a suspicious and fearful culture begins with us.

And, so, it is we who benefit from taking these risks. When logic tells us that it is reasonably safe to open our selves to the other, when we approach the stranger with compassion instead of fear, we live in a place of strength. In Meg Barnhouse's words, we "bend, grow and change in a supple way."

But there is another personal benefit to welcoming the stranger. There will come a day when it is you who is standing alone in the dark. Literally or figuratively, one day you will be in some sort of trouble, seeking shelter from the cold. You will be the one looking for sanctuary in a time of crisis. Someday, it will be you who is the stranger. When you wait behind that closed door, who will open it for you?

