Unitarian Universalist Meeting House – Chatham February 12, 2017

"When We Assume . . ." by the Reverend Tracy Johnson

I want to begin by doing a little exercise together, and I will admit to borrowing this tool from a colleague because I think it helps to illustrate some of what I want to talk about today. So – hold on a minute – let me just change real quick here –

There! So let's say that you've never seen me before – this may be true for some of you! And for the rest, you probably don't know me all that well. What are some of the assumptions you might make on first encountering me? You know – we pass on the street or I am new to church and show up in coffee hour – Go ahead -

Age – gender identity – socio-economic status – racial or ethnic origins – others?

The truth is that some of these things might be quite apparent and others of them are not so clear cut. We take a chance when we assume – hence the old adage, right? A recent dive into diversity with my colleagues at WE CAN, the Harwich Port non-profit where I serve, has me pondering the concept of assumptions. It seems that we all make them and we are all often the object of other's assumptions. It happens unconsciously. They appear to be driven by unanswered questions that pop up for us in our day to day interactions. And those questions are rooted in our make-up; the melded reality that is our being.

At WE CAN we read a book and then gathered each week for discussion facilitated by the Rev. Pancheta Peterson. It was called "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" written by Beverly Daniel Tatum, and when I saw the title of the book it set me off on a series of assumptions – questions really, based in curiosity more than anything – "Why are all the black kids sitting together?" There could be lots of reasons I thought, but each of my thoughts was ultimately driven by an assumption – an "if this, then that" kind of thing.

When we assume, we jump from those inner questions that are bubbling up, directly to answers of our own making. We skip an actual interaction. How fair is that? In the process we deny ourselves and others the opportunity to look deep into our centers and express what is most preciously held in our hearts. I'm not suggesting that it isn't risky to take this intermediate step. It can get messy without a level of trust and an ability to accept people as they come. But the fruits of the encounter can be beautiful and lead to ripened and mature relationships.

I am someone who believes in the effect of the observer on the observed. Whether I intend it or not, speak it or not, show it or not in my body or facial expression (which we all often do, so very unconsciously) how I see you has an effect on you and vice versa. It happens at a level well beneath our surface understanding. What I have been thinking about lately is that when the energy that is already there is compounded by words and expressions it has an even more powerful effect. And that my own energy is colored by all that I am and have experienced in

my lifetime and even in the lives of my forbears, so that I can never begin with a blank slate, even if I try on the surface. There will always be what came before informing my spirit. Ms. Tatum talks about racism as an environmental stressor, one which I believe is something that has been painted on all of our slates with a near-indelible ink.

People of color, persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, the faithful whose practice differs from the stated norm, in this country at least, it occurs to me have an inner slate that has been drawn upon by privileged white hands of hatred, oppression, misuse and abuse. When a person of color, for example, receives my assumptions, silent or expressed, they land on a place of great pain and potential anger, and that person has no more control of that fact in these times than I do. It is that carrying with us, you and me; that cries out for unpacking, that is so vital in these times of rampant assumption.

I've been reading Rev. William Barber's The Third Reconstruction in preparation for a UUA Common Read Discussion later in March at First Parish Brewster (You all are invited to join us for a pot luck and talk – see me after the service if you are interested!). Somewhere along the way in his journey he realized that we are often our own enemies; that to move forward together we would need to deal with our unquestioned assumptions and internalized fears. This speaks to me of the value of asking the questions. Assumptions keep us apart from one another. The questions and the conversations that follow bring us together in ways that foster growth and understanding. That goes for us as communities of faith first where we can get clear about who we are, what we bring; and then moves to a wider circle involving other faith filled folks in our neighborhoods where the conversation may get a little harder, but we are setting aside assumptions to make it work; and finally to those communities of people who have been marginalized by history and assumptions, those who have been "othered" by norms set in stone, calling out to be chipped away at. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who said that we must face the fact that either all of us are going to die together or we are going to learn to live together and if we are to live together we are going to have to talk. It's that important. A matter of life and death she says. Certainly a matter of how we live and what our legacy will be.

There was a time when I looked at all people – white, brown, black, whatever their expressed identity – as just people. We are all simply human beings, I thought. And I do believe that we truly are, even still. But I came through a time when I realized that a piece of this belief serves to deny a person of their uniqueness and so I began to embrace the idea of diversity within our humanity as a more treasured constant than our humanity alone. Difference is hard, but good.

I am given to consider what I add to the slate as I reflect on this journey together – what emanates from me and what it might be adding to for the person I am in relationship with. I want to know what is conscious and on the surface for a person and I want to explore what is deeper within a person that informs who they are. I want to dig deeper into who I am so that I can better understand how my presence effects another person.

I have been thinking about how it feels to have assumptions made of me. Some of them are hurtful and so I want to acknowledge that, but then turn it around and, in the case of race, make room for understanding what might be feeding a person's assumption – what of their story impacts how they see me. I want to be ever more careful about the assumptions I make as I reflect on how painful they might be for a person to receive. I want to look to that deeper story to inform my interactions; to acknowledge that what each of us carries may be beyond the complete understanding of the other. I will never have the experience of being enslaved on my inner slate; so I need to make room for that as a possibility when I am interacting with a person of color. And I need to make room for the idea that I will likely be understood first as a white woman of privilege to whatever degree that may be accurate, until there is the time and the safety of space for shared truths from each of our stories, when we can set aside assumptions – at least the one's we are conscious of – and really begin to know one another.

There is this assumption that only people who are racially other have an entryway into understanding race, according to author Eula Biss, who comes from a family of mixed racial make-up. But she doesn't believe this is all that unique in America. Upon taking a closer look we might all find this to be true. After all, Ancestry.com is making a huge hit these days! The nugget of truth that I find in her comments is that we all have had the experience of being other; being on the receiving end; and that this is a jumping off point into understanding one another. There will always be different degrees of othering; each of our slates bears its own palate of color and hue and tone.

In my ministry with WE CAN I am faced each day with women who are strangers to me, but for the fact that they are sharing their often raw and real experiences. In those moments I am, we are, called upon to set aside assumptions that could easily get in the way of connections which can foster hope and change. And risky as it is, we try to ask the questions that help us move beyond those assumptions to a place where dignity is restored and upheld. We ask ourselves tough questions about where our assumptions come from and we muster our humility to ask others the questions that percolate from within us. Together we engage with participants on a journey to shared understanding rooted in mutual respect.

We said to one another this morning in our responsive reading that we all have secrets and struggles; dreams and hopes, and that we want to know how each other got to the place we find ourselves now. We said we'd "listen, and listen again" – what a powerful notion – on the road to deeper understanding. In each encounter with a stranger there are endless possibilities of potential outcome. Like Heather McGhee and her first time caller Garry, initially with the safety of distance between them, but then forgoing that and drawing closer and closer, a real friendship among equals emerges. If you've not heard me say so before, you will hear it now – that I see potential and possibility as sacred opportunities to acknowledge the holy in our midst. It is our responsibility – each of us – to awaken to that call of Love and Compassion, moving us steadily toward a justice that is lived and experienced in all the human family.

I invite you to begin to notice your assumptions in the days to come and to explore what they might be rooted in. May we find the courage to set aside assumptions and to ask the questions

that will lead us on a journey of shared understanding. May we open our hearts and join with those who until now have been strangers to us; and may there be a common good that arises in our midst and carries us forward into new ways of being in our world.

So may it be.