

My Scouting Journey  
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United Church of Broomfield  
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As a 7th grader, in 1979, and wanting some independence from my family, I joined a friend's boy scout troop. Once a week and once a month, I had a few hours or a couple of days of independence. That didn't last long.

Soon my brother, Dwayne, joined the troop, then my sister, Cyndie, joined an explorer post, and finally my brother, Kevin, joined cub scouts. He would eventually join the troop. My parents also became scout parents. So much for independence.

In 1981, Dwayne and I went to the national jamboree together with 30 other scouts from our area. Kevin and I went to summer camp together when he was old enough, and the whole family went on an extended road trip with the troop to the world jamboree in Canada. Of my siblings, Dwayne and I spent the most time together in scouts - at summer camps, monthly camps, and the Jamboree trip. Scouting was a great experience for me, for my siblings, and for my whole family.

In the late 1980s, Dwayne came out to me and the rest of the family. Around the same time, I became aware that the national Boy Scouts of America's national office was rejecting and excluding non-heterosexual youth and adults from membership in its programs. In 1990, James Dale, a 19-year old Eagle Scout, assistant scoutmaster and college student, was removed from membership in his unit. James fought this discrimination, all the way to the United States Supreme Court. In a split decision in 2000, the Supreme Court sided with the Boy Scouts of America national office.

And so when considering the enrolling my own son in the boy scouts, I also considered the injury BSA had done to countless gay youth over the years. Keri and I decided to enroll Kevin in troop 767, and I volunteered as an adult leader but I made a personal commitment to support the LGBTQQIA+ community in BSA. In 2012, our previous pastor Greg recommended I reach out to Michael Schuenemeyer about the national United Church of Christ committee on scouting. Rev Schuenemeyer has worked with me over the past decade to re-establish and lead the UCC scouting working group.

In 2013, an overwhelming majority of voting members of BSA supported ending discrimination against gay youth. But membership for adults remained limited to heterosexual adults. In 2014, Rev Schuenemeyer and I organized phone calls and face-to-face meetings with UCC Executives and BSA National Executives, including

Geoffrey Black, general minister of the UCC, Robert Gates, President of BSA, and Wayne Brock, Chief Scout Executive. Our purpose for the meetings was to be visible and vocal supporters of the LGBTQQIA+ community as the UCC Scouting Working Group. We wanted to show BSA National Executives that the Christian church is not a monolithic community that supports discrimination against the LGBTQQAI+ community.

The discussions were not easy: Wayne Brock insisted, despite the legal record, that BSA's purpose in excluding gay youth or adults, was not discrimination, but rather that BSA had to uphold its' right to determine its membership. And Robert Gates simply could not understand why parents would exclude their children from participating in an organization that supports discrimination against the LGBTQQAI+ community. The fact that their policies to exclude the LGBTQQIA+ community were injuring youth, adults and families had no bearing on their thought processes.

It wasn't just James Dale, excluded from further participation as a young adult, who was injured. Boys across the country, as they discovered their own identities or orientations, had the choice of hiding that identity or orientation, or being expelled from scouting. Many scouts join the program early in grade school. The scouting program becomes their social support network. They were not allowed to live their authentic lives in the program, and doing so meant the risk of being expelled from their units and excluded from their social support systems.

Today's scripture challenges us to think about others, especially when social norms provide advantages to ourselves and disadvantage others. In Matthew, chapter 9, the Pharisees, members of the religious power structure of the Jewish community at the time, challenged Jesus for his outreach to disadvantaged members of the community, such as the tax collector Jesus invited to join his community.

Where the Pharisees held that everyone must strictly adhere to their views and social norms, Jesus understood that these views and norms excluded members of the community. Tax collectors and other sinners could never be included in the Pharisees' community. Such undesirable people were unworthy of their ministry, and by extension unworthy of God's love.

Jesus turned this view on its head. Jesus responded that those who are healthy have no need for a doctor, but the sick have a need. To be clear, I don't believe that Jesus was saying that God found the people the Pharisees excluded to be undesirable or unworthy of love. I don't believe that God finds people excluded by religious or social systems to be lesser or unworthy of love. We see this in Jesus' words, in which he

quotes scripture, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." And he continues with a rebuke of the Pharisees: "Go and learn the meaning of those words."

We find the words Jesus references in Hosea, scripture we also heard today. In this passage, God laments that the love of Israel and Judah is ephemeral, fleeting like the morning dew. God sent judgment like light over them, sent prophets to cut them down. As I read Matthew, I see Jesus as the incarnate prophet hewing (or cutting down) the Pharisees for their hard hearts, shining God's judgment over them.

In the New Revised Standard Version translation, we read the words of the Eternal as:

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

In the translation "The Message", the meaning of the Eternal's words in Hosea is even more clear in our language today:

"I'm after love that lasts, not more religion."

By inviting the tax collector and others to follow him, Jesus invited into community those rejected by the social structures and religious teachings of the time. Jesus demonstrates steadfast love - ministering to those separated from social structures. Jesus demonstrates more love, not more religion.

"I'm after love that lasts, not more religion."  
I want you to know God, not go to more prayer meetings."

These are the words of the Eternal in Hosea chapter 6. If this was not a powerful rebuke of the Pharisees, I don't know what is.

I'd like to believe that the advocacy of the United Church of Christ scouting working group affected BSA's 2015 decision to drop the nation-wide ban on LGBTQQIA+ adults, but I believe the decisive events came primarily from employment issues. One eagle scout, who was out as gay, turned 18 and was hired as summer camp staff. Firing the scout would violate state law at the summer camp, and the local council refused to fire him. In contrast, Denver Area Council rescinded a job offer to a woman who inquired about BSA policies supporting the rights LGBTQQIA+ employees. Denver Area Council's decision to rescind the job offer to her was a violation of state employment law, and Denver Area Council subsequently settled a civil lawsuit with her.

Subsequently, under the leadership of Michael Surbaugh, Chief Scout Executive in 2016 through 2019, BSA ended its discrimination against all other youth on the basis of gender, sexual identity and sexual orientation. BSA has now renamed its flagship programs from Boy Scouts to Scouts BSA, removing the literal gender identity from the name. This is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, beyond these policy changes and name changes, the BSA national office until this year, did nothing to ensure that youth and adult members can bring their authentic selves to BSA programs.

In 2017, a full four years after BSA ended the ban on gay youth and a full two years after BSA ended its ban on gay adults, BSA held its national scout Jamboree at the Summit in West Virginia. By this time, the UCC, through the scouting working group, had formalized its relationship with the BSA national office, and decided to collaborate with the Universalist Unitarians by sponsoring a booth in the God and Country area of camp.

National Jamboree is a large event - in 2017, 31,000 scouts, adult volunteers, and staff attended. It is as much a make-shift city focused on fun activities, as it is a camp. At the Summit, scouts can raft whitewater on the New River, climb rocks in the New River Gorge, and ride mountain bikes. There are concerts in the evening, and traditionally, the President of the United States gives a speech during an evening campfire ceremony.

The UCC working group, in collaboration with our UUA colleagues, decided to make the UCC - UUA booth a place where the scouts and adults could stop in, have a snack, pick up a pair of sunglasses if needed, and hang out. To stimulate discussion, we put up posters asking the visitors to write what diversity and inclusion meant to them. The colorful sunglasses were arranged in the order of colors in a rainbow on the table. Attendees thanked the staff in the booth for creating a safe and welcoming space. Some attendees commented that there were times they did not feel safe or welcome at the Jamboree, due to their sexual orientation or identity. Again, the national jamboree was held a full four years after BSA ended discrimination against gay and lesbian youth and a full two years after BSA ended discrimination against gay adults.

Within a few days, the BSA national office's general counsel demanded that we take the posters down, and not display the sunglasses like a rainbow. Rev Schunemeyer and the other staff refused, and the general counsel informed us that we would be expelled from the jamboree. Rev Schunemeyer began arranging a press conference should the UCC and UUA staff get expelled as promised by the general counsel.

And then a miracle occurred. The President of the United States gave his speech at the national Jamboree, and treated the event like a campaign rally. He told an inappropriate story about being on a yacht. He recycled campaign material about the size of crowds and the size of his victory. He denigrated his predecessor. The BSA national staff shifted to damage control and the rainbow of sunglasses in the UCC - UUA booth was forgotten.

Overwhelmingly, my experience within scouting at the local level has been positive, from my time as a scout in troop 748, to my experience with my son in troop 767, to my experience as chartered organization representative for troop 511 and United Church of Broomfield. The scouting settings can be welcoming, inclusive and safe, if the adults and scouts are intentional about safety and inclusion.

My experience within the UCC scouting working group has also been a blessing. I have met leaders from across the country who inspire me every day. The UCC scouting working group has allowed my voice to be amplified with others in our group and with other allied groups to work towards making scouting welcoming and inclusive.

Recently, I have seen reason to be hopeful that BSA programs, in all of their settings, can become welcoming and inclusive. This year, a new merit badge focused on diversity, equity and inclusion will become required to complete the rank of Eagle Scout. I am hopeful that our UCC scouting working group, through talented authors such as Pastor Andi Fox, can create a companion document to guide the understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion. In a recent meeting of the BSA national religious relationships committee, which is a largely protestant and evangelical group, members stood up for and supported a Taoist group proposing new religious curriculum for their youth. BSA now has a chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer, and employee resource groups that support the LGBTQQAI+ employees and other affinity groups. But as Pastor Michael shared last week, members of the LGBTQQAI+ community continue to be the targets of discrimination every day.

So I am hopeful for continued progress, but progress will not create itself. We need to work for progress. The arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, but we must stand with those who are excluded by the social structure, or the arc will straighten. It isn't easy to stand up to the power structures and keep your wits about you when you face challenges. But we as scouts are called to do just that: stand up for others - to help other people at all times - including standing up for others when they are excluded by the social structures within the BSA.

I challenge you, scouts and all who hear this message, to live according to the Scout Oath and the obligation to help other people at all times. As you help other people at all times, do so understanding that some people may be facing challenges that aren't obvious to you, and do so understanding that helping other people at all times won't always be easy. But be brave, the 10th point of the scout law. Having the courage to stand up for others may lead to uncomfortable discussions and hurt feelings, but you will feel better and come out stronger for doing so.