

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

“One Congregation, Many Paths”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 3, 2010

Sermon

William Cowper famously said, “Variety is the spice of life, that gives all its flavor.”

Prominent Congregationalist clergyman, social reformer, abolitionist, and speaker, Henry Ward Beecher, wrote:

Our days are a kaleidoscope. Every instant a change takes place in the contents. New harmonies, new contrasts, new combinations of every sort. Nothing ever happens twice alike. The most familiar people stand each moment in some new relation to each other, to their work, to surrounding objects. The most tranquil house, with the most serene inhabitants, living upon the utmost regularity of system, is yet exemplifying infinite diversities.

And Leo Tolstoy said, “If so many men, so many minds, certainly so many hearts, so many kinds of love.”

I hope I'm not just preaching to the choir today when I say diversity is a high value for Unitarian Universalists. I'll go out on a limb and say we *all* love novelty and innovation. The experience of discovery and surprise has almost universal appeal. Enjoying new fashions with their appealing combinations of styles, colors and fabric, new architectural expressions that work with line, light and energy creatively, and, for me personally, the latest electronic gadgets, all feed our enjoyment of the material world. In the arts, new, emotionally evocative, musical performance, new visually stimulating artistic expression, and new intellectually exciting ideas, delight and challenge the mind. Novelty, as mathematician and theologian Alfred North Whitehead observed, is at the core of what organic and non-organic existence is all about.

Unitarian Universalism takes novelty seriously as the core of our approach to religion. We think revelation is not sealed up in ancient scripture. We assert eternal truth is as potentially available right now as it was when the prophets revealed it. Our biases and conditioning may cloud our vision and muffle our hearing, but the truth is here, right now, to be known. Our religious cousins, the United Church of Christ, says it this way, “God is still speaking.” The Transcendentalists felt we had contact with that truth through our intuition. The Quakers, and many Unitarian Universalists, refer to contact with this truth, as, the inner light.

Thus, we are not a backward looking faith trying to reconstruct some perfected past. Remember, the Garden of Eden had a serpent. The Promised Land of the Jews didn't have quite enough milk and honey for everybody. We don't think the first Christians had community exactly right. The Desert Fathers shouldn't be our role models. Nor did any of the early American utopian communities, like the Shakers and the Oneida Community, figure out some perfected society for us to try to recreate. Yes, we can learn from all of them but none of them had all the answers.

So if there is no perfection in the past and no perfect road map to creating the future, we need to

work together, drawing from many sources to build the world we dream about in our Unitarian Universalist purposes and principles you'll find in the front of the gray hymnal. Thus, diversity is vitally important for our way of doing religion.

So why is becoming a diverse congregation so difficult? Why are we less than point one percent of the population? Why are we primarily a European ancestry, well educated, middle class movement? Our research phase preparing [our strategic plan](#) found some of our members do not feel their beliefs are welcomed here as much as they'd like. I've heard we are not very welcoming to those who are economically challenged. It is one thing to value diversity. It is another to truly welcome it.

I would assert this morning, that the barriers to diversity are primarily emotional. While we value diversity intellectually, we have emotional preferences that interfere with it. I'll use myself as an example. I have pretty eclectic musical tastes but I don't want to hear very often, if ever, [John Cage](#)'s stochastic music or misogynistic, obscenity-laced rap music on Sunday morning during our service. I like using big words like stochastic and misogynistic. I'm uncomfortable trying to sing hymns with non-English lyrics. Usually, Christian liturgies don't move me emotionally. The Eucharist just doesn't connect me to a higher power. On the other hand, I do have strong emotional connections to some of those old Protestant hymns. I've sung the UU versions of them for over 30 years, and some, like For the Beauty of the Earth, since childhood. I love having a moment of silence in our service. I love the deepening effect of repeating liturgical elements in our service. I have emotionally based preferences that shape what I like to do on Sunday morning.

As I expect most of us know from personal experience, changing habits and patterns is difficult. I remember when the green hymnal came out in the 1980's that fixed sexist language found in the earlier blue hymnal. I really didn't like the changes because I'd stumble over the new words. Some of you from Protestant Christian backgrounds know this experience singing our de-Christianized hymns from the gray hymnal. The new words were fine in the green hymnal, though not always sensitive to the rhythm of the music, but I was just emotionally resistant to the change.

Those preferences and attachments usually only become noticeable to us when challenged by change. Since I was sympathetic to the reasons for changing the sexist language of the hymns, it was embarrassing to have politically incorrect feelings about changing those words. This kind of mismatch often engenders feelings of shame and guilt. Those who do diversity training bend over backwards today to work sensitively with feelings of shame and guilt. Of course, by their nature, emotions are not very rational. I know intellectually that a tall, well muscled young man of African descent shouldn't trigger fear in me. But my emotional brain still remembers being assaulted and mugged by two such teenagers over 25 years ago. It takes a very caring, trusting environment to allow these feelings to rise to the surface of consciousness, be examined and be healed.

Often diversity trainers have not able to create these safe environments in work places, where opportunity, power and privilege are at stake. I've heard how some of our members struggle with diversity here, not feeling safe to expose their feelings. And I've seen us make great progress. Our efforts to be welcoming of diversity in sexual orientation has been very successful here and across our congregations. Not that we're perfect of course, but we've made great strides over the last thirty years.

A zone of safety is very important for encountering diversity. Many of us are quite happy to invite in a guest speaker to stimulate and educate us, as we will do next Sunday when [Imam Djafer](#)

Sebkhaoui from Troy will be our presenter. It is yet another thing to remove the chairs and bow prostrate toward Mecca during a Sunday service. It is much safer to explore other religions out there at arms length and bring home our insights. It is quite another thing to explore the diversity that already exists in our congregation. It is even harder to encounter the barriers to diversity inside each of us and in our congregation.

I'm quite happy, however, to report that there are Unitarian Universalist congregations doing just that. I'll describe one and then show you two short videos about two more.

The first congregation intentionally working to create a welcoming climate for theological diversity is the Cleveland West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church. Their two co-ministers exemplify theological diversity. The Rev. Wayne Arnason followed me as President of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship. His partner, the Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, was President of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship about the same time. They encourage spiritual growth and development of their members by providing support groups to go deeper into Buddhism, Christianity, and a group called "HAFA" which stands for Humanists, Atheists, Free-Thinkers, Agnostics. Many UU congregations have UUBF and UUCF groups as well as Humanist groups. Many congregations like ours have Earth centered spiritual groups. Here, you can meditate with me on Sunday mornings at nine. We have a Humanist group and now we have an emerging Christian group that met this past week. We can find affinity groups that share our beliefs within the larger congregation that shares our values.

Becoming more multicultural has been a more difficult nut to crack. I'd like to show you now two videos, the first describing All Souls in Washington DC, and the second, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Annapolis, Maryland. These are two congregations doing inspiring work encouraging wider multicultural diversity in their congregations.

Religion for Our Times: Multicultural Worship

Religion for Our Times: Multicultural Ministry

What do you think? Are you inspired by what these three congregations are doing? Would you like to consider learning from them and applying those lessons here?

I like these words from well known actor, drag queen and model RuPaul who said:

In terms of my growth as a human being ... I want to present a whole and complete picture – the yin, the yang; the black, the white; the boy, the girl; the sane, the insane. Because we are all Everyman – a rainbow of different roles and different people. Exploring the colors in myself and in others is my life's passion. There is no such thing as normality – each and every one of us, if we dare to be whole, is a gorgeous peacock. Whether you believe you have one life to live or hundreds, there is no reason not to spread your wings and fly. - RuPaul (from *Lettin It All Hang Out*, 1995)

How do we spread our wings and fly? Through encountering and embracing difference, we grow bigger hearts, wiser heads, and even healthier bodies. We connect more deeply with our inner resources of wisdom, compassion and guidance through encountering the world's diverse religious resources. We strive to create a safe environment here to unpack our emotional baggage, heal our emotional wounds, and challenge and stretch our emotional attachments as we encounter diversity.

And as we become clearer about what is happening inside of us, we expand our appreciation of the same processes going on in others as they seek inner wisdom, compassion and guidance, both here in this congregation and in the larger world.

I conclude with words from the book, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* by [Angel Kyodo Williams](#), a spiritual teacher, activist, artist and founder of New Dharma Meditation Center for Urban Peace:

We have the power to choose not to let our beautiful diversity be a source of division amongst us. We have to see ourselves as having enormous strength because of the wealth of our resources. That wealth lies in our differences.

Benediction

One final quote to close the service from [Ernest Holmes](#):

In our daily living we encounter infinite variety in all things. But behind the expression there is a pattern or form which is the foundation. There is a unity, but not a uniformity, that exists between all similar expressions, a unity that resides in the ultimate creative nature of the Universe, a unity that allows freedom of individual expression ... behind every person, every race, there is a basic pattern, a pattern that is individually expressed. If there were not the possibility of variation of expression, life could never have developed its infinite variety. And if there had not been a basic pattern behind the development of humankind, there never would have been any way for it to develop.

May we overcome the emotional barriers to diversity
so we may freely enjoy each other's individual expression
and sense the unity behind all variation.