

THE DIVERSITY IN OUR DIVERSITY

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First Unitarian Church

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When I was in high school in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, I developed a strong interest in traditional Southern Appalachian folk music. Eventually I claimed the violin we had around the house and began trying to scratch out a few fiddle tunes. Soon I encountered a difficulty: Sometimes I found several versions of the same tune. One version might be in a book of fiddle tunes. Another version might be on a recording. Yet another version might be running around in my head, after I had heard someone else play it. It bothered me that there were several versions of the same tune. I wanted to know which was the correct version, the standard version, the authentic version, the real version.

Later, when I discovered New England contra dancing, I developed a strong interest in New England fiddle tunes. Historically less isolated and more literate than the people of Southern Appalachia, the people of New England had written their fiddle tunes down on paper, so in most cases there was a single version of a tune. The part of me that likes things neat and tidy was more comfortable with this less ambiguous repertoire.

Aside from fiddle tunes, Southern Appalachian music also includes songs, including ballads from England which were composed many hundreds of years ago. Many of these songs were passed along from one singer to the next by oral tradition with no written music, and thus many of these songs have several distinct variants. When he was collecting these ballads in the Southern Appalachian mountains from 1916 to 1918, the English musicologist Cecil Sharp took great care to write down all the variants he discovered.

Somehow I found it easier to accept diversity in songs than diversity in fiddle tunes. I found it fascinating to hear the same words sung to a completely different tune. Perhaps there is a lesson here for Unitarian Universalists: We might get along better if we would learn to sing our divergent theological opinions to one another.

Unitarian Universalism encourages individual theological reflection, so it is not surprising that we would have some theological diversity among us. But it would seem that diversity happens even when it is not necessarily encouraged. Most religious traditions have some range of theological opinion or spiritual practice or liturgical form or social convention. There are different kinds of Catholics, different kinds of Presbyterians, different kinds of Hindus and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists. Learning to live with some measure of religious diversity is part of the story for almost everyone

who belongs to a religious tradition. Moreover, religious humanists have their differences with secular humanists, while atheists have their differences with agnostics. And speaking of agnostics, one of my theological school professors identified at least three distinct varieties of agnosticism.

In 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor published a book entitled Principles of Scientific Management. Taylor championed the notion that for industrial workers there was “one best way” of getting the work done. This “one best way” maximized output and minimized input and it could be scientifically determined. Those who accepted Taylor’s basic idea tried to identify the most efficient hand, arm, and body movements a factory worker might use to assemble a particular product, and then insisted that workers use exactly those movements.

When I jumped into theological school from the world of physics, I suppose I was expecting to discover the “one best way” in religion. After all, in the world of physics, statements about the world were expressed with the wondrous precision of mathematics. (It is still remarkable to me that the basic properties of the natural world can be expressed mathematically.) People had managed to come up with some rather non-ambiguous statements about the natural world; why not do this once and for all in religion as well? You may have heard the story about the kindergartner who was drawing a picture of God. “But no one knows what God looks like,” said the teacher. “Well,” replied the kindergartner, “when I finish my picture they will.” My attitude toward religion was something like that when I entered theological school

Eventually, I am happy to say, I learned that religion was not simply about arriving at an accurate description of the world, but more about hope and motivation and purpose and ethics and courage and justice.

Throughout my years as a Unitarian Universalist minister I have heard people affirming theological diversity but also cautioning that too strong an affirmation of theological diversity can make it practically impossible for our congregations to work together. I have also heard people taking the next step and seeking ways to identify and affirm the unity in our diversity: that is, promoting the belief that despite outward appearances and expressions we have a common center. One of our ministers has stated this affirmation of a common center quite memorably and poetically with these words: “Behind all our differences and beneath all our diversity there is a unity which binds us forever together in spite of time, and death, and the space between the stars.”

Since I want very much for the congregations I have served to work together, I learned to deal with our theological diversity in several ways: First, I have just blithely assumed that for all our apparent theological diversity, we all mean pretty much the same thing even though we may use different words. Second, I have observed that most of us are middle class white folks and that the assumptions and methods and values we adhere to are basically all the same and that this set of assumptions and methods and values is what really unites us despite whatever theological language we may use. Third, I have noted that since most of us are middle class white folks, we have not even begun to experience real diversity, of the sort our congregations might have to deal with if larger numbers of people of color from around the world decided to make themselves at home in our congregations.

Yet another way that I learned to deal with our diversity has been to shift the focus from theology and religious language to social justice and human rights and

environmental sustainability, pointing out that our seven principles are really a series of ethical statements, and they define Unitarian Universalism in our time in a positive way with little ambiguity and much specificity and in a way that transcends theological opinion. There's the unity in our diversity, I have said to myself: never mind reconciling the theists and the humanists, never mind finding just the right amount of God-language so as to keep the theists and the humanists more or less happy. Just promote social justice and human rights and environmental sustainability and those pesky theological differences will come to seem unimportant by comparison.

Imagine my surprise, then, over the last year when I became newly reminded that behind all our differences and beneath all our diversity there might well be still more difference and still more diversity, even with regard to social justice and human rights and environmental sustainability. Last year I presented two sermons in which I explored ethical issues about which I have strong convictions. One of these sermons, delivered last September, explored the ethics of eating, and I drew a connection between our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle which affirms the interdependent web of life and my long-standing commitment to not eating meat. The other sermon, delivered this past May, explored issues of justice between Palestinians and Israelis, and I drew a connection between our UU commitment to justice and human rights and my belief that one of the major obstacles to peace in the Middle East is the continuing injustice and humiliation and oppression experienced by the Palestinians. I am convinced that I am quite in the minority in our congregation with regard to my views on the ethics of eating, and I am equally convinced that I am quite in the majority in our congregation with regard to my concern for justice for the Palestinian people, although I would not have known that prior to presenting that sermon. Nevertheless, both sermons provided me with an opportunity to understand that even when we Unitarian Universalists set aside theological differences, even when we set aside questions about God, serious differences may remain. At times we may be able to identify a unity in our diversity; but at other times we may see principally only the diversity in our diversity.

Many religious communities are struggling with the acceptability of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. We Unitarian Universalists are very strongly united on this question: our congregations have ordained many GLBT people, our ministers have conducted many holy unions for GLBT people, and we have welcomed GLBT people in positions of leadership throughout our movement. But it was not always so: Prior to the 1960s being openly GLB or T would have drawn forth a great deal of ridicule and hostility within our liberal, progressive Unitarian Universalist churches. How did this change happen? Somewhere along the way some courageous person had to say, Well we say that we honor the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, so how does that call us to treat GLBT people? Some courageous person—really many courageous persons—had to help us understand more deeply the meaning of our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Those who first put into words that affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings—many years ago we used different words and called it “the supreme worth of every human personality”—those individuals may not even have considered that meaning, may not have even considered that it might apply to GLBT people, yet later generations found it as though it had been waiting there all along. The Unitarian Universalists who will come after us—the Unitarian Universalists who will inhabit this sanctuary a hundred years from now—who knows

what meanings they will find self-evident in our tradition, meanings that we in our time would find strange and difficult. My image of our evolutionary ethical commitment is a lotus unfolding and disclosing deeper and deeper meanings. But those deeper meanings may be difficult to accept at first.

Now it is easy enough to explain the relative unpopularity of one's ethical understanding by calling oneself a prophetic pioneer and predicting that someday the rest of one's community will become enlightened and catch up. In some cases that will surely be true. For example, the first Unitarian Universalists who stood up for GLBT rights were prophetic pioneers and eventually the rest of the Unitarian Universalist universe came to a similar understanding. In other cases one has to ask this question: If a prophetic pioneer cries out in the wilderness and nobody follows along, did that prophetic pioneer really say anything prophetic? Nevertheless, I would not soon discourage anyone who feels a prophetic call, for the early going will inevitably be tough even when one has something worthwhile to say.

Diversity is a fact of life. Diversity within a community may also be a remarkable achievement. Within a Unitarian Universalist congregation, the presence of more diversity may give us additional practice in handling diversity as a fact of life, and the presence of more diversity may give us a wider and more complete picture of the world. Diversity may reflect virtue, for diversity is unlikely to be present unless a particular virtue is present. The particular virtue associated with diversity is respect: something more than tolerance, something other than agreement, something perhaps less demanding than love.

We need to be clear just what kind of diversity we are talking about when we talk about diversity. First, we may believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, but this does not mean that we have to accept the inherent worth and dignity of all ideas and all behaviors. Some ideas are more coherent, more useful, more factual, more creative, or more insightful than others, and some behaviors are more acceptable than others. Some behaviors are downright unacceptable in a religious community. Second, diversity of theological opinion presents a different kind of challenge from diversity of race, class, and culture. I would even say that diversity of theological opinion is not nearly as difficult to achieve in a religious community as diversity of race, class, and culture.

Years ago I found that the part of me that likes things neat and tidy preferred that there be a single version of a fiddle tune. That same part of me enjoyed the unambiguous descriptions that physics provided, and the attitude of figuring out the "one best way" in religion was certainly present when I entered theological school. Yet I also enjoyed hearing different versions of songs from the Southern Appalachians, just as I enjoy hearing the life stories of people, which are always beautiful variations on a common theme.

Over the last two or three years, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh has blossomed with regard to its energy and interest around issues of human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Perhaps this is a reflection of spiritual growth within the congregation as a whole; perhaps this is a reflection of increasingly worrisome realities in our world today. I envision First Unitarian Church as a well-known center of concern for social responsibility in the East End of Pittsburgh, and I envision concern for social responsibility providing a greater sense of purpose and meaning and enthusiasm for our religious community. Yet I also recognize that issues of human rights, social

justice, and even environmental sustainability may reveal differences of opinion among us we had not really known. Balancing passion and dissent, deep conviction and appreciative understanding, courageous prophetic witness and religious community—these may prove to be important challenges for us over the next few years. Accordingly, I urge us all to do several things: first, to become more familiar with our own Unitarian Universalist history and to develop a deeper appreciation for our heritage of both reason and social witness; second, to keep reading and studying and learning so that we can become well-informed on the issues that matter to us, so that we can avoid ignorant opinions; and third, to practice respect and patience with one another, to engage in mutually appreciative dialogue with one another, and to believe that even when all we can see is the diversity in our diversity, that even when unity of understanding and belief and action elude us, we can still seek a relational unity based on respect and intellectual humility and good will.