

Which Side Are You On?

--a sermon for Association Weekend--

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First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

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"Oh that we realize the door to God's kingdom is the one upon which visitors knock."

—Ken Nye, American poet

Readings

Our **first reading** today was adapted by Mark Hicks from a poem originally written anonymously by a gay, high school student. This piece is a part of the new UUA curriculum *Building the World We Dream About*. It is entitled "Mattering".

My father asked if I am gay
I asked Does it matter?
He said, No not really
I said, Yes.
He said get out of my life.
I guess it mattered.

My friend asked why I talk about race so much?
I asked, Does it matter?
He said, No not really
I told him, Yes.
He said, You need to get that chip off your shoulder.
I guess it mattered.

My neighbor asked why I put that ramp up to my front door.
I said, Does it matter?
He said, No not really

I told him because it made my life easier.
He said, Is there a way to make it less obvious?
I guess it mattered.

A member of my church asked why I like gospel music.
I asked, Does it matter?
She said, No, not really.
I told her that it connects me to my southern, Christian childhood.
She said, I think you're in denial about your oppression.
I guess it mattered.

My God asked me, Do you love yourself?

I said, Does it matter?

She said, YES!

I said, How can I love myself? I am gay, Latino, disabled, and a Christian in a hostile climate.

She said that is the way I made you.

Nothing will ever matter again.

Our **second reading** is from UU minister Mark Belletini

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also had to provide opportunities for deepening, for what I call spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift...unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work.

Sermon

It was in 1995 that I found myself back in church again after a long absence from the Methodist and Presbyterian churches of my youth. I was singing Gregorian chant in an Episcopal church on Staten Island as a favor to a college friend. I didn't go for the services. I went to sing.

But what I found there surprised me so much that I was moved to reconsider all that I had assumed was possible in religious community. The priest was openly gay, as were at least some of the members. Perhaps I had lived a sheltered life up to that point, but I didn't know that the GLBT community could be respected and honored in a church. This was a huge relief to me, and an inspiration.

But even more revolutionary to me, was the racial diversity present in that congregation. Similar numbers of black and white members attended, side by side, taking part in the rituals and the spirit of the place.

There was no grandstanding of this diversity. It was just the way things were. And it felt holy. Indeed, it was holy.

My four-month presence in that church opened my heart and my mind,

enough that I developed the courage to leave in search of a religious community where my more humanistic theological perspective might be a better fit, where a diversity of race and culture might coexist with a diversity on views of God.

I knew enough about Unitarian Universalism to know it was a place to look, but I didn't know much else. The closest Unitarian Universalist church to my Manhattan apartment was The Community Church of New York.

Amazingly, as I walked into that church for the first time, seeing the banners of the world's religious traditions hanging from the rafters in their sanctuary, I witnessed a similar kind of racial diversity. Nearly equal numbers of black and white members shared in the experience. The service was comfortably familiar to me, except there was no professed dogma or apparent expectation that everyone there believed the same things about God, if they believed in God at all. The hymns, the principles, the words from the pulpit, including the meditation all left space for me. I felt as though I had come home at last. This was the church and the religion for me. Open, accepting, and diverse.

Is it any wonder I felt called to ministry? Why wouldn't I want to serve and to grow this religion, this open, accepting, and apparently, diverse religion? The fact that I could so quickly consider preparing for the ministry after a decade of avoidance of institutional religion says a great deal about what I found at Community Church and what Community Church helped me find in myself.

As I began to get to know the greater UU movement, though, I quickly realized that the racial diversity I experienced at Community Church was an aberration. When I would speak with other UUs about what I had found at Community Church, they were quick to point out that I shouldn't expect to find that kind of diversity in other UU churches. Overall, I was told, UUism is a predominantly white denomination.

That may be true, I thought. But even if it is, I had seen the future. And the future was **not** predominantly white.

Now that I've been in this religion for 13 years, I know that the warnings I had received were mostly true. The only congregations in our movement that experience significant racial diversity have been those who have either intentionally and faithfully sought it, or who have had historical links to this kind of diversity. In the case of Community Church of New York, the diversity was a long-lived result of the work of a former minister John Haynes Holmes, who had been one of the founders of the NAACP (the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) 100 years ago. In the three congregations in which I have participated after Community Church of New York (including over 8 years here with you), racial diversity has been something the membership has claimed to yearn for, but not something we have realized.

In a 2008 survey of the membership of one of our biggest UU congregations, All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 90 percent of the respondents reported that the change they most wanted to see in their church was more racial and cultural diversity. My sense is if we polled our own membership, we might find a similar desire. But there is a difference in Tulsa. Just a few months after this survey was administered to the then 1600-member church, something surprising happened: They got what they said they wanted.

Perhaps some of you have read this story in our denominational magazine, the *UU World*. The short version is that a multicultural evangelical Pentecostal congregation in Tulsa, led by the Rev. Carlton Pearson, was losing its membership, and therefore its building, and needed a place to worship.

The decline of Pearson's church was a direct result of Pearson's own conversion from the exclusionary, either-you-are-saved-or-you-are-unsaved dictates of his previous faith into a more Universalist Christian understanding of a God who loves and saves all. When Pearson, a charismatic black preacher, religious entrepreneur and rising star in the evangelical movement, started preaching a gospel of inclusion to his church, his more theologically conservative brothers and sisters began to denounce him, and all but his most ardent followers deserted him. His congregation, Higher Dimensions, went from 6,000 members to just a few hundred. The minister of All Souls UU church in Tulsa, the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, a dynamic young religious leader himself, had befriended Pearson and explained to him that his newfound gospel was historically rooted in Universalism. Lavanhar invited Pearson to hold services for what remained of his Higher Dimensions congregation in the sanctuary at All Souls, during the 11am service time that was dormant during the summer months.

So that summer, following the early, traditional UU service at All Souls, the praise music would start, including drums, electric instruments and a full-blown gospel choir, and a service altogether different in style, but not different in foundational Universalist substance, would begin.

Within a few short weeks, over half the attendees at Pearson's service at All Souls were UUs who enjoyed the spirit and the vibe of his worship. A real synergy had begun to take hold and significant religious boundary crossing

ensued. By the end of the summer, a decision was nearing. What to do with Pearson's congregation when so many of the UUs would return from summer? When and where would Higher Dimensions worship?

Around this time, Pearson determined that he needed to pursue other opportunities, which including seeking affiliation with the United Church of Christ, our more intentionally Christian theological cousins. You may wonder why Pearson didn't seek ministerial association with the UUs. When I saw him speak at this year's General Assembly in Salt Lake City, he explained: "Well, I love UUs. You all are wonderful. Nobody is as out in front on supporting homosexuals as you are. You all are great at loving gay people. You're just not as good at loving people who love Jesus."
[Ouch!]

Nevertheless, he suggested to his remaining congregation that they should fold themselves into the All Souls church community that had been so supportive and welcoming and many of his congregation agreed. All Souls hired most of the Higher Dimensions staff, including the musicians, and the vibe of the 11am service remained as it had been in the summer. Most of the liturgy of that 11am service was as familiar as it had always been: readings, meditation, sermon. But the music and the overall spirit was much more in keeping with the worship style of Higher Dimensions. UU hymns were adapted to have a more gospel feel. And just as had been the case in Pearson's congregation for years, each 11am service begins with the proclamation: "Welcome to...the friendliest, trendiest, most radically inclusive church experience in Tulsa." And everyone applauds. Well, almost everyone.

Of course, not everyone is happy with the changes. Such big changes never produce unanimous acceptance. At least seven members have refused to pledge and some have left the church. But more than 150 new members have joined and not only has the racial diversity of the membership increased, so has the age diversity, as more young adults, comfortable in a more culturally diverse religious experience, have found a home at All Souls.

And even if most long-term members have remained, some are struggling with the changes, communicating to the church leadership that they came to All Souls "to get away from all that." When Lavanhar asks them what the "that" is, he says

"people tell me it was authoritarian leadership, the dogma, the anti-intellectualism, the superstitious and magical thinking, the way women were treated, the homophobia, the guilt, the shame, the judgmentalism, the proselytizing, and the sense that their community was especially privileged with righteousness and truth, and the way

that other traditions and ways of thinking were demonized.”

But, he points out, none of this has been brought into All Souls.

One of the aspects that so many of us treasure in our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion is that we do not have a test of belief that we must complete to be members. There is no creed. There is, however, a covenant, a way we behave toward one another, a conviction that we can learn and become more by living through our differences than we can by trying to adhere to one specific way of viewing the world. Lavanhar reminds his members, and in turn all of us, that

“...There is an African American experience of God...that has been molded and shaped by slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and persistent racism. Many have an experience of God that involves Jesus. They don't say it's the only way. If we can't accept that experience in our church,” he says, “then we're not living by what we say.”

The Tulsa congregation got what it said it wanted, in all the messy, complicated glory that living on the margins of cultural expectations and realities can bring. The members have had to take a good, long look at themselves and each other, finding there the possibility that comes not from perpetuating what has been, but in opening to what can be.

Lavanhar describes the new reality of what it means to be a part of All Souls Church in Tulsa when he says, “It's full of excitement and possibility and also danger and risk. By living out our covenant and statement of purpose, it has forced us to change. It's not forsaking Unitarian Universalism. It's being Unitarian Universalist.”

Can I get an Amen?

When I first discovered the story of All Soul's transformation into the kind of church its members had said they wanted it to be, I wept. I cried not just for the joy of how one congregation heard the call of inclusion and came to understand and accept that call as foundational to the principles of freedom, acceptance, and liberation at the core of our liberal religious tradition. I cried out of longing for what I mistakenly thought I had become of a part of when I first joined a UU congregation, and for what I have missed ever since. I cried in my sincere hope for what our religion still might be...even here...in Des Moines, Iowa. And I cried in recognition for how little I have done up to now to help bring that hope to reality...how, I too, have succumbed to the presumption (if not resignation) that Unitarian Universalism is a predominantly white denomination. As our former UUA

president Bill Sinkford has reminded us, we need to stop saying that we are a predominantly white denomination. It may be true, but continuing to say it doesn't do anything to change it.

A few years ago, during a service I built around your questions, one of you asked, "When are we going to have a more diverse membership?" My response was truthful and to the point. "When we are ready," I said. I explained we would be on our way to a more diverse membership when we were willing and able to see our congregation not as a completed product just waiting for people to find us, but when we were willing to go out into the community and build the kind of respectful, curious and open relationships that will lead us to invite people to create something new with us. Not something that would conflict with our core principles of religious freedom, acceptance of individual difference, and democratic process, but which would build on them, especially our Universalist value of radical inclusion, which understands that our well-being as individuals is inexorably linked to the well-being of everyone else. If all are ultimately saved, our cultural differences matter far less than our commitment to protect and respect our inherent worth and dignity as sisters and brothers in our shared human journey. The Higher Dimensions community would never have found All Souls if not for the relationship that Rev. Lavanhar had built with Rev. Pearson. But let's be clear. This kind of relationship building is not just the work of the clergy. It is the work of everyone of us who years for something more in our lives and our religious communities, something more diverse, something more reflective of our human experience, something more real. This work belongs to us all.

I agree with UU Minister and Theologian Paul Razor who contends that it is time for us to do away with the assumption that we can reason our way into multiculturalism. We have to live it, feel it, embody it. He says, "We will have to wade into the new [ever-expanding multi-] cultural waters up to our necks, and even risk getting in over our heads, without first being able to measure the currents or predict the storm cycles." He suggests we have to let go of our fear of losing control of our "safe and tidy way of being religious" which manifests itself as a kind of theological "don't ask, don't tell" policy: "Out of fear of saying [or doing] something that might offend someone," he says, "we can easily end up saying [or doing] nothing."¹

I believe that if we can expand our expectations of what is possible in our UU congregations, we can begin to understand that becoming more multi-cultural in our approach and sensibility will not infringe on or deny our identity as a religious movement. It will deepen it. And if we don't reach for

¹ "Ironic Provincialism" Paul Razor, Director, Center for the Study of Religious Freedom and Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies Virginia Wesleyan College Berry Street Essay, 2009

more diversity, our rich religious history will be further relegated to a place of irrelevance in an increasingly multi-cultural society.

The choice is ours. And the time is now.

Today we are participating in Unitarian Universalist Association Weekend, a chance to join with other UU congregations across the country in celebrating our bonds to each other and reflecting together on not only who we are, but who we may still become.

In a few moments you will have a chance to share some of your abundance toward the goals of this year's weekend, "Growing our Diversity."

All the money collected at the Association Weekend events across the nation this fall will help develop UU congregations that are more welcoming to all people by

- Expanding the new UU *Building the World We Dream About* curriculum, a 12-month series of seminars and activities designed to help participants explore topics "that increase their understanding of race and ethnicity, as well as systemic racism, through spiritual reflection, journaling, visual arts, poetry, music, theater tools, simulations, guest speakers, and field trips."
- Supporting congregations who are working to create a Unitarian Universalism that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse.
- Enabling UU congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity development, and leadership development.

Before I ask you to fill out the envelope to be found in your order of service, giving the amount that represents the intersection of your generosity, your passion around expanding our multicultural identity, and your financial resources, [you can still give to this effort by visiting www.uua.org/giving] I want to say a few more things about our congregation's potential growth in diversity.

Our growth will not be reflected in how many people of color attend our services each week. At least not at first. You see, I don't want to suggest that this is a numbers game. What I am suggesting is a new (or perhaps renewed) state of mind about what our church is for, what the religious endeavor truly is, and what we are called to do in it and through it.

My dream is that our congregation becomes known in our larger community not just for specific corporate actions that we take (however important those acts may be from time to time), but for fully living our UU values in the

world as individuals, modeling the kind of generous, open-hearted, and affirming way of being in relationship with others that will inspire them to want to be contributors to our shared journey, to want to add their voices and imaginations to ours. We will grow our diversity when we embrace the multicultural relationships we already have and search for more...not for the sake of getting people to become Unitarian Universalists, but because by seeking and building relationships across the lines that so often divide us from each other, we are becoming better Unitarian Universalists ourselves.

It's simple really. We don't need more bells and whistles. We don't need a gospel choir, but I for one would love it if we had one from time to time! We need more honest, open and curious relationships, and the courage to allow those relationships to inform our understandings of who we are and who we might become.

Many of you are aware of the new Unitarian Universalist Standing on the Side of Love campaign. More than just a PR effort, Standing on the Side of Love is a catch phrase for who our liberal religion has been historically and theologically and who we still strive to be. And yet, as catchy as the motto is, I invite you to consider how dangerous it could be to uncritically accept it and not see the real challenges inherent in it.

If we are "Standing on the Side of Love," what are those who aren't with us doing? Is "Standing on the Side of Love" a boast or an invitation? What does "Standing on the Side of Love" really mean? The side of love, to me, is not the side for arrogant posturing, declarations of unequivocal truth, or the refusal to consider, welcome, and be informed by the full spectrum of humanity's experiences and understandings. The side of love is the side that is curious about difference, committed to greater understanding and forgiveness, and courageously willing to take the risk to be in relationship, even with people each of us, in our own ways, may perceive as different. Especially with them. This is what church is for, I think. To stand up for justice and equality when we see it has been denied, yes. But also to teach us the disciplines of loving despite all the reasons not to.

UU theologian James Luther Adams contended that church is where we practice what it means to be human. I like that idea a lot. But I also acknowledge the fact that there is a lot of humanity out there beyond what we typically find in our UU congregations. We could mourn this fact or allow it to propel us to action, toward a necessary and concerted effort to open ourselves to new practices and experiences with more people than we are used to.

I like how my colleague Rosemary Bray McNatt puts it. She says:

“We—ministers and congregations—want our churches and fellowships to be safe. But safety is a relative term when it comes to religious community. For if we are really practicing what it means to be human, in an ever widening circle of humanity, our congregations may become some of the most dangerous places we know, because they will become faithful communities of change, as we call each other into that territory of the soul that distinguishes the church from a social club, or a sorority, or a coffee house for the vaguely spiritual.”²

So my UU companions and friends, here is to danger, and growth, and love, and possibility, and diversity, and courage, and hope, and a Unitarian Universalism rooted in all that we are, in pursuit of more than we have been, and in commitment to all that we can be. Here’s to a Unitarian Universalism and a First Unitarian *Universalist* Church of Des Moines ready at last to truly stand for love and in love, not just taking sides, but living through the sides to a place where seeking diversity is not just a goal, but a religious discipline, a way of being expressed in everything we do and everything we are becoming.

Before we sing a hymn and then collect your generous contributions toward this effort, I leave you with the words of our UU theologian Thandeka. She writes:

“[We are]...A place where new conversations about money, race, and God in America can commence. With this new beginning, loyalties need no longer be skin-deep. Here God’s broken humanity can be healed. Difference will be affirmed as the grace of human engagement. The term person of color will now refer to every human being. Dare we dream of such a day? Yes. Let the church say Amen.”³

² Response to “Ironic Provincialism” by Paul Rasor □ Rosemary Bray McNatt □ June 24, 2009, Salt Lake City, UT

³ ~ Excerpt from *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, by Thandeka, copyright © 2001. Reprinted by permission of The Continuum International Publishing Group.