

Embracing Diversity

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To you, I may look like just another middle aged white American, but to me I am complex, diverse, and completely full of surprises! Cultural myths can be life giving, helping us expand our horizons, reach out to the stranger, and encouraging us to be our best selves. Cultural myths can be stultifying and deadly to our sense of self!

America has many cultural myths, some of which are life affirming and others which are deeply hurtful and deadly to our spirit. The one I will focus on this morning is the great American Melting Pot. This notion that we welcome diverse immigrant traditions, simply to melt them and meld them into one bland white America, which is analogous to taking good whole wheat to make Wonder Bread, stripped of its inherent goodness but fortified with chemically enriched vitamins and minerals: soft, bland, and innocuous to eat. This myth is pervasive and can be deadening to our sense of self!

I have ancestors who left their English homes in the 17th Century to try to make a life in America where they could worship freely! I have ancestors who came here from Canada in the 18th Century, to build their lives and homes in this fertile, prosperous environment. I have ancestors who left homes in Sweden in the 19th Century, to find work and make a living in the Mass. machine tool industry. My wife's parents left China in the 20th Century, to escape the civil war and revolution that was wrecking havoc in that country then. I am certain that many of you have stories of relatives coming here in the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries with tales of their own, and rich deep cultural traditions that they brought with them. These people brought to America many life affirming cultural heritages which they cherished deeply, and yet for the most part they were encouraged to forget their pasts, to melt and to meld themselves into a new white American mass of common behavior patterns.

So I was brought up, perhaps like you, in 20th Century America to cherish that I was an American, first and foremost, to believe that you and I are not different despite these rich streams of ancestors and traditions, but rather that all these traditions had been melted into one new American sense of being:

which was self-referential, vitamin fortified, quite transitory without deep roots or traditions, malleable and mobile. The American Dream was that by leaving these parts of our heritage behind, all could move continually ever forward and upward forever. We are not all the same, nor should we be, but we are all worthy of love and respect. Far too many are only now counting the cost, noticing the loss of these rich family traditions, the loss of diversity and pride in our distinctive and diverse heritages and ways of being. In the 21st Century, we need to once again reclaim and embrace our own growing diversity.

The melting pot never really did work anyway. There were people of color, who could not or would not blend into this white mass. There were people of faith, who could not or would not blend into this so-called American dream of one people, under one Christian God. There were people of differing languages, differing family traditions, and differing capabilities and aspirations who never quite fit into this cultural myth that we would all become the same, and that that would be for everyone's good. These diverse groups that would not melt quietly away, at best made a lumpy porridge of this American Dream and showed proof that the melting pot was an image that diminished us as a people, and robbed many of their distinctive heritage, of their deep sources of comfort and meaning! This drive towards an American sameness prevented us being able to fully embrace our differences, to fully embrace and celebrate the rich and growing diversity brought to our shores by newcomers. This room today is a rich blend of cultural diversity, yet our near neighbors represent an even richer and more complex cultural and religious diversity just beyond our doors, literally within walking distance, a few miles from us, is tremendous economic, cultural, ethnic, gender, and educational diversity waiting to be embraced.

America's sense of self was dominated by this melting pot notion through most of the first two thirds of the 20th Century. For many, it has been replaced in recent years with a new respect for tolerating our differences, for recognizing that we cannot and we need not all be the same, that some of us will always be different. This is a better model, but it still leaves us short of true wellbeing. Tolerance alone can too easily leave us in our own guarded communities, not hating the other but not embracing them either! Those who say that strong fences make for good neighbors clearly believe that our neighbors are best kept at a safe distance from us. Such tolerance can prevent outbreaks of animosity, but it does nothing for transforming us into true community while embracing our differences, which for me is the

transcendent goal of community, to welcome and embrace the other in their otherness. As Francis David said, “We need not think alike to love alike.” This is what it means to embrace one another in our true diversity. This is why we need to reach out to others different from ourselves and invite them in, to share with us our diverse traditions together.

Every four years, the Unitarian Universalist Association appoints a Commission on Appraisal to study deeply some issue in Unitarian Universalism. Their most recent report is titled “Engaging our theological diversity”, which would make you think that it is only about UU theological diversity, but for me it is rich in UU cultural sociology: what do we each bring into the movement and how do we recognize and what do we make of the diversity here among us? Our current UUA President, Bill Sinkford says: “I believe that Unitarian Universalism is growing up, growing out of a cranky and contentious adolescence into a more confident maturity. A maturity in which we can not only claim our Good News, the values we have found in this free faith, but also begin to offer that Good News to the world outside these beautiful sanctuary walls. There is a new willingness on our part to come in from the margins.” We can model what it means to be diverse Americans. The commission reminds us that “Encouragement to spiritual growth is a stated goal of congregational life in our Principles, and the rich theological milieu present in most of our congregations would seem to be fertile soil for such growth; but if people are afraid to talk about and experience the diversity before them, then the potential for growth will be stunted.” The Christian must feel comfortable along side the Atheist, the Jew with the Wiccan, the Buddhist with the Secular Humanist, and each and all must feel that they can celebrate together and be encouraged to add their unique spiritual path here among us, if we are to be community. Instead of a melting pot of bland sameness, we become a tossed salad of vibrant and healthy expressions of our collective diversity.

The Commission found: “caring congregants valuing love and community; curious folk seeking growth, learning and transformation; committed disciples of advancing truth who cherish wisdom, intellect and logic; concerned individuals balancing freedom and choice with service to others and a vision of justice; courageous risk-takers pledged to integrity and honesty; creative appreciators of inner harmony and a world of beauty; covenanted people honoring the interdependent web and affirming human worth; compassionate companions who accept one another and respect themselves; and open minded people learning from dialogue in diversity –

Unitarian Universalists aspire to be all these and more. These aspirations, rooted in UU's own experience, in their dialogue with one another, and in their history as a people are under girded by an implicit theological world view – these aspirations describe UU's common ground as a religious people.”

We are a grounded yet imaginative faith, with roots that go back over two thousand years, and branches that keep budding anew! Our roots in the Judeo Christian traditions are deep and strong, yet we also draw increasingly from many living and diverse sources. We are a reasonable faith, employing reason to ensure our faith's consistency with enduring scientific concepts about the nature of emerging reality. We are an experiential faith, measuring all our truth statements against our own lived experience, rather than beliefs which we have merely received from others. We are a profoundly human and relational faith. The interdependent web calls us to love all sentient beings, and to support one another along our individual spiritual paths. We are a free and responsible faith. We are a faith of heretics and free thinkers, yet we seek to choose wisely, that we may play our part in making this emergent world a better place. We are a curious and hopeful faith. Ever open to the new, we aspire to be a transformative faith, a justice seeking faith, co-creators of an ever emerging community. This vision of our faith transcends, but does not ignore or overlook, where we have come from, and where each individually is going with their faith, for to quote Francis David again, “We need not think alike in order to love alike.” That is the core of our faith!

So I am surprised and disappointed when people feel hurt by the Christianity in our heritage, reflected in our beautiful Tiffany stained glass windows and religious symbols. I am disappointed and worried when a Jew, a Muslim, or an Atheist is not made to feel welcome here, as if they are not also part of this journey. One member of the Search Committee expressed it by writing that “One thing that has come up at various times at First Parish, especially during the recent search process, is the obvious role that First Parish can play in a community like Brookline which is culturally and religiously diverse. There is a sense that there have been a number of couples and families waiting in the wings for a UU community that more openly embraces people who have been raised in faiths other than Christianity. This can often be people of mixed marriages who are trying to find a spiritual balance for their families. I feel that in this light, it is especially important to use words that will make people feel they can belong at First Parish...

Using inclusive language within our doors will portray the message we'd like. By the way, when I say 'inclusive', I really mean to include Jesus' teachings as well as others and to be mindful of our church's history." I heard this as wanting us to hold on to all that is affirming and good from what each of us brings from our own personal spiritual paths, weaving them together into a beautiful tapestry of diverse and wonderful encounters with the sources of meaning in our lives. Not creating some melting pot that mixes and blends these distinct paths into some thin UU gruel of neo-spirituality, but rather a rich and diverse salad of seekers after being, pursuers after depth and meaning in our lives. Finding in community a place to belong and to affirm our distinctive paths.

So I am very happy to welcome these new members to our signed community of seekers this morning. They bring the best of many diverse traditions, coming together with us to continue to learn, to seek, and to mature into a rich and diverse faith, where all are truly welcome in our loving and diverse religious home. We will need to adapt somewhat to integrate these and others into our expanding community, and that is a good thing. They will need to adapt somewhat in order to walk comfortably along side us on this journey as well. For most of us, that might mean being willing to listen, to truly listen, to each other as we each grow into our own fullness of being. But this is why we come together in community, for the sake of humanists, Buddhists, theists, atheists, Christians, Jews, Pagans, and everyone else among us, we would be one! Coming from diverse religious, cultural, ethnic, gender, economic, racial, and educational backgrounds, we strive to form a voluntary community that can love and support one another on our spiritual paths, creating a religious home where all are better for the rich diversity from which we can weave our pledged community. And so may it always be. Amen.