

Growing Our Diversity?

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Our Unitarian Universalist movement has been focused for many years on “Growing Our Diversity.” I’ve come to believe that pursuing diversity may be a bit like pursuing happiness. It leads you into some rather strange and potentially embarrassing behavior and has you mostly chasing your own tail.

When we pursue happiness, we think of happiness as attached to a certain situation or event or experience or possession or change in our lives. If we are lucky, at some point we learn that happiness is more a way of seeing the world and being in the world than it is achieving one thing or another. To paraphrase another quote, “There is no way to happiness, happiness is the way.” And so it may be with diversity.

When my friend Terry and I were in seminary in Berkeley, we used to walk near another denomination’s church which touted itself as being “radically inclusive.” We pictured a big crook coming out to capture particularly strange or “diverse” people as they went by. It never came out for us, but that’s understandable. I’ve seen that crook come out in our movement, however.

I was at General Assembly one year and my friend, James, and I were in the Exhibit Hall. James is many years younger than I am and many inches taller. He is what some people would refer to as African-American although he is actually bi-racial. We walked past the booth for the Nominating Committee which finds people for the various committees of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A member of the committee almost broke a leg running after us. Well, not us --- James. Without knowing anything about either one of us, the person thrust a clipboard out to James and asked him if he would apply to be on a committee. We laughed about it later. We also laughed about the fact that although he is not a minister, he often gets asked to preach in our congregations --- on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend.

A few years ago, the UUA unveiled its new health insurance plan, a monumental accomplishment. The rates were not competitive with Kaiser in this part of the country, but I was delighted to see this as an option in our movement. I was surprised, however, to see that I was a poster child for the insurance. There on the front cover was a picture of a group of people, a picture of diversity.

Turns out it was a picture of the Fund for Unitarian Universalist Social Responsibility, which I chair, and the woman who took the picture was never told how it came to be used on the promotional materials. And there on the materials and then on the big screen at General Assembly was a picture of, yes, James. James was holding his child. James, like most of the people in the picture I was

in, doesn't even qualify for our insurance coverage. James was not so amused this time.

I am used to going to General Assembly and seeing my colleagues of color invited into the most prestigious of situations and often there is no explanation other than their ethnicity and I wonder at the position that puts them, and us, in. I see our pride at electing an African American President of our Association and a Latino and, although I supported both of them, it can feel a little creepy. Look at us, we are mostly white but we have a person of color as President. Aren't we special? As if we don't realize that all systems of oppression depend on there being exceptions to the rule, people who succeed in spite of all the odds.

A large church in our district celebrated a major anniversary a few years ago and put together some beautiful materials to mark the occasion. One of the pieces showed people in all sorts of configurations. There were singles and families. There were families with one parent and families with two parents; some were parented by a man and a woman, some by same-sex parents. There were young people and old people. There were atheists and theists etc. There were different ethnicities represented. Clearly some deep thought had gone into this. I read it all and realized that every adult had a graduate degree. Oops. Not so diverse.

I could go on and on. I have not even begun to talk about the nature of some of our trainings on diversity or the fact that anti-racist, anti-oppression, multi-cultural training is often elevated above all other kinds of training in our movement, even, sadly, before conflict management training or learning to listen to one another.

A big oops came at our General Assembly a few years ago. For years it had been our custom to have a local Native American elder come bless our gathering. I loved when local people or our people would talk about the land we were on and its history, but asking a Native American to come bless our gathering always made me squirm, but I couldn't quite articulate why. And I looked at the glowing faces around me and was even more perplexed. I was delighted with when the local Indians at one place were self-aware and courageous enough to tell us something like they had their own work to do and that making us feel good was not high on their list. They had named what made me so uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable that we were doing things to help make us feel good about ourselves and not because we value diversity or are willing to do the hard work diversity requires.

And all this work didn't seem to be making us feel any better. Only worse. The prickliness of people at General Assembly some years has almost been enough to make me lose my religion. You hurt my feelings. No, you hurt my feelings. I always thought the point of sensitivity was to be sensitive to others not hypersensitive to ourselves. We're a religion. Here's an idea: Let's assume good faith and go forth in good faith. And let's lighten up, people. A little humor can go a long way in helping us understand the errors and the irony of our own behavior.

Rosemary Bray McNatt, one of only 24 senior or solo ministers of color in our movement, said this in response to the 2009 Berry Street Lecture:

As we continue to parse this complex issue, we forget at our peril that even topics as innocuous as what color to paint the bathroom walls continue to fall victim to the realities of our congregational systems, to our habits of being, and to the inordinate length of what we in the parish measure as church time.

We underestimate as well, I think, the reality of resistance in our congregations, a resistance rooted not so much in racism as in matters of class and culture. We forget that when we talk about cultural competence in ministry, or cultural change in ministry, that is not just those other people who have a culture.

Unitarian Universalist congregations have a culture.

She goes on to describe that culture and ends by saying, “Many of us do look ahead in our hymnal to see whether we agree with the words, and forget that the person sitting next to us may need exactly the words we are refusing to sing. Most of all, many of us love our UU congregations because they represent for us places of respite and peace and sanctuary.”

And then she said, “But the truth is that community is precisely what we need here, most particularly religious community. More than one person in our movement has remarked over the years that, for people who are blessed with the gift of free religious community, we are also cursed with a nasty little Calvinist streak that we would do well to examine. We would rather be angry and judgmental with one another and ourselves than be tender and merciful, in simple acknowledgement of how hard it continues to be to do what we must do in our congregations—we must admit that we have a specific, sometimes alienating culture, and we must change it. And we must grieve the loss of the familiar and gain some measure of courage to embrace the new.”

Doug Muder attended 2009 General Assembly and this is the brilliant question he heard running through a variety of presentations: “At its core, what is Unitarian Universalism really about? Do we have a message we are trying to bring to the world? Or do we have a culture we are trying to preserve against extinction?”

This question goes to the heart of the matter. As he points out, if we are trying to preserve our culture, we are doing a pretty good job, if we are trying to spread our message, we haven’t been too successful.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian and pastor, was hung in 1945 for his role in trying to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He wrote of “Cheap Grace” which involves skipping the hard work. I think we’ve been pursuing “Cheap Diversity.” We want to be diverse without having to change our culture. It reminds me of couples who say, “Our lives won’t really change after the baby.” Well, if that’s the case, I am sad for the baby and the couple. If we want to be diverse because it makes us feel good or we think we should be, not because we have a message the world needs in all its diversity, we are destined to be stymied.

We will not grow more diverse or perhaps even grow until we are willing to change our culture in favor of our message.

And I am feeling that shift in our movement and in the coming generation of ministers. There is a congregation in our movement that has been on the cutting edge of that culture change. Its culture has changed from one of scarcity to abundance. Its culture has changed from club house to light house. Its culture has changed from trying to meet the personal preferences of its members to working instead to build up the common good. Its culture is changing from expecting little to expecting much. Its culture is changing from questioning authority to creating accountable leadership.

This congregation is more intentional about recruiting and training lay leadership and rotating leadership. Its forms of worship are changing. It has made great strides in understanding the diversity that already exists within and in honoring that diversity. This congregation is learning about creating safe space rather than comfortable space. This congregation has learned how to work through major conflict or potentially divisive issues and stay in relationship. This congregation has a covenant of right relationship and a policy for responding to disruptive behavior. This congregation has created a culture that calls individuals to their best selves. This congregation is learning to use its institutional power to bend the arc toward justice even if it means that some pet projects will fall along the wayside. This congregation is learning to assume good faith. It has “grieved the loss of the familiar” and maintained “the courage to face the new.” This congregation has work to do and it will always be so. This congregation I speak of is, of course, this congregation.

If we are about preserving culture, we are setting ourselves up for smallness or for culture wars. I don't want either one. I want diverse groups sharing a message that the world needs to hear. And that message is one of diversity and unity. “We need not think alike to love alike.” “One light, many windows.”

Across race, class, educational levels, political affiliations, ages, gender and other demographics, I want people who want to be saved and salved by that message and who want to help spread it. I want people not like me because they are going to be able to understand better how to spread that message to people not like me and because when all that divides us falls away, we are living in the mystical moment. We are making real the beloved community. We are honoring our differences because we are using them for a common purpose.

Here are some of the holy sounds heard by a congregation that is not preserving its culture but spreading a message of transformation: Oh? This is the sound of holy curiosity. This is, “Tell me more. Help me understand.” This sound is the sound we might make when we come across different viewpoints or theologies. It is the sound we might make when we learn to question our own assumptions.

Aha! This is the sound we make when we have insights into our own role in oppression and understand the systemic nature of injustice or the ways in which we are saying one thing but doing another.

Ouch. This is the sound we make when others have made assumptions about us that aren't true or who are judging us as less than because we are different. We express our hurt without rancor. We express our hurt rather than nurture resentment.

Oops. This is the sound we make when we realize we have made assumptions based on our own experiences or situation.

Ah. This is the sound we make when we learn to work together to build the common good. When we learn that our differences and our similarities can work together for the common good.

I've learned all these sounds in the embrace of this amazing movement. We've had some oops moments for sure in this movement. How could we not? It takes a lot of oops and ahas, ohs and ouches to get to Ah. And you can quote me on that. I would not be here without our larger movement and neither would you. We count on the larger movement and the larger movement counts on congregations like ours.

When we know how to change our culture and are willing to change our culture in order to live out the message, when we truly embrace and enjoy the diversity already within our walls, we may find that there is no way to diversity, but diversity is the way.

At the gas station this week, there was a young Latino man pumping gas, a child at his side, a woman in the car behind the wheel. His head was shaved and, except for his face, completely tattooed. He wore a sleeveless t-shirt which revealed the tattoos on his arms. They were not tattoos of butterflies and kittens.

At one point, he raised his t-shirt to scratch his belly. "TMI," I thought. Too much information. I turned away and got in my car to leave. He faced my car then for the first time. I saw the opening of the tube in his neck, his tracheostomy. I smiled at him and his face beamed back one of the warmest smiles I have ever seen. And then, as if that was not enough, he blew me a kiss. He blew this old, judgmental white woman a kiss. Many cultures, much diversity, one message. Ah!

Sermons are spoken, not written. The actual sermon was based on this manuscript which was written with that in mind.

A Friend Just Like Me
Rev. Jan Christian

There once was a little boy named Neal (spelled with an A) who wanted a friend who was just like him. And one day, it happened. Another little boy, just his age, moved in next door. His name was Neil (spelled with an I).

What fun they had. They liked the same games. They both loved peanut butter and banana sandwiches. They both were afraid of spiders. It was the perfect match. At least for a while. After a few weeks, they began to see there were some problems with this. Like when there was a spider in their play house, neither one of them had the courage to play along side it or to move it to another place. When they played baseball, they both wanted to be short stop. They both had a little bit of a mean and stubborn streak and they each had trouble being the first to say they were sorry. That was a problem too.

One day, they were riding their bikes in front of their homes (which had the same floor plans, by the way) and they saw a moving van and a passenger van pull up out front of the big house across the street. They stood with their mouths open as a whole bunch of kids emerged from the van. They had never seen such an assortment of kids anywhere. One had flaming red hair and a gazillion freckles. Another came down a special ramp in a wheelchair. They had different skin colors and different kinds of hair. One was dark skinned and had silky hair and one had some amazingly frizzy hair. A few were very young and some were older. A few were their age. One was pretty stocky and a few were really skinny. One seemed to be talking with his hands. They all seemed to be looking out for one another.

After the van was empty, Neal with an A turned to Neal with an I and said, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Neal with an I replied, "Of course I am." And they both went rushing over to make friends with kids who were not like them. And they found out that sometimes it is easier to make friends with people not like you and you learn a lot that way. Soon the word spread to other neighborhoods and kids came from all over town who wanted friends just like the friends in Neal and Neil's neighborhood.