

You're Welcome Association Sunday 2009

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Let me begin my challenging words with song. According to number 407 in our hymnbook, "We're gonna sit at the welcome table. We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Hallelujah!" Wait a moment, we are already sitting at the welcome table and the questions before us are whether we really want others to join us, whether we want to be relevant to a wider array of class, culture and race, whether we will share our faith?

The First Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin graciously accepted me, though I was theologically different from the majority of Americans, and though I came from a working class family, from the other side of town; they welcomed me to the Unitarian Universalist table; and once there, they challenged me to keep growing in honesty, understanding, inclusivity, and service.

The Unitarian Universalist ministry welcomed me; though I could not afford graduate school, UU scholarships made it possible for me to get an education, which helped me transcend some class limitations. The Unitarian Gothic Cathedral in Buffalo welcomed me to its ministry, as did the beach community of the Unitarian Church in Fort Lauderdale. Though I was young, the First Universalist Church of Denver gave me the benefit of the doubt, welcomed me warmly to their inclusive community, then I was welcomed to the Philadelphia suburbs, the ministry of the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, and now to the leadership table at our Association headquarters in Boston.

We have all been welcomed to the bountiful table of this liberal faith; we have been blessed with religious freedom, spiritual sustenance, education, inspiration, and opportunities for service; we have been welcomed and, as is our way in religion, we have been challenged to keep growing our faith, and right now, especially to focus on growing our diversity.

This is difficult for us, for everyone. Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist best known for his book *Bowling Alone* has conducted some new research in which he found, what we all knew, that: "In the face of diversity, most of us retreat." Marilyn Sewell provides the following summary: "...When people are near people unlike themselves, they tend to 'hunker down.' Not only do they not interact with people who are different from themselves, but they don't interact with their own group as much: they watch more TV, they have fewer friends; they are less likely to work on community projects."

The challenge of growing our diversity may be even greater for us because we don't even acknowledge that we're a group, the fact that we have a particular culture. UUs consider themselves to be open and respectful, but ask a Republican if they really feel welcomed; ask a Christian Fundamentalist, or someone who is a pro-lifer, a gun owner, or a fiscal conservative! We have the highest education level of any demographic group and we are

damn proud of it, ask a UU who doesn't have a college education. How welcoming are we to people who appear different from our culture? What is the experience of being different like for them?

Let me share a few stories. Around ten years ago, the congregation I served in Denver, First Universalist, had a partner church relationship with Campbell African American Methodist Episcopal Church, which is located in another part of the city. (It was a wonderful experience, a gift they gave us.) We met several times at their church and at our church; we did some social service projects together. We tried to listen and learn from one another, and we learned that it is hard to transcend our differences and cross the color line.

At one of our gatherings, a young black professional from Campbell told us what happened to him as he was coming to our church that day. He was working in the south suburbs and had a little time before our meeting so he decided to stop in a grocery store to pick up a few items. Walking in he noticed that he was the only person of color in the store; he also noted that the security guard noticed he was the only person of color in the store and started to follow him. The young black man walked up and down every aisle in the store to see if the security guard would follow him everywhere he went, and he did, until he left the store.

Society makes it hard to be different. As a religious minority, we have an inclination of what it is like to be different, but we also know that it is vastly more challenging for racial and cultural minorities to feel welcomed in our society.

The second story I have never shared before. Pastor Shaw of the Campbell AME church invited me to join him at the meetings of a community group of which he was a member. Its purpose was to get African-Americans to donate bone marrow for transplant to those suffering from Sickle cell anemia. I met with the group of 30 several times. We had some similarities; we were all well dressed, well paid professionals, educated, well spoken, caring and committed people. But, I felt out of place. I was the only one who was not a person of color. I began to question my purpose for being in this group. I did not know any black people to ask to donate their bone marrow besides those already solicited by Pastor Shaw. And, the partnership between the two churches was ending; our attendance at the joint church meetings was dwindling, and his members had learned that we were not Christians and they were raising questions about crossing the religion line; so the churches were not going to meet again. It felt awkward to continue going to the Bone Marrow Donation Advisory Board meetings; and, I was busy, had other pressing responsibilities, so I quit. I had many reasons for quitting, but clearly one was because it was hard to be the only white person, the only one who was different. We know what it is like to be a religious minority, but we don't know what it is like to be part of something bigger, how to help the whole be more loving, equitable, just. Reflecting back on my experience with the Advisory Board, I realized that they wanted diversity too and I discerned another reason that I dropped out of the group. I did not understand my purpose in being there. It was not to try to get African-Americans to donate their bone marrow; it was to show them other people cared about their problems. And that is what we need to do; we need to be welcoming and we need

to show others that we care about their problems—because if we affirm the interdependent web, they are our problems too.

Let me share one more story. There was one African-American family in that affluent suburban congregation I served. I asked how they came to join. They were one of the first African-Americans to move to the Philadelphia suburbs; they wanted a good education for their children. Unfortunately, some of their neighbors were not welcoming and threatened them. (As we know, it is hard to be the first one, the only one, different.) Fortunately, a group of white people organized and kept a vigil walking in front of their home to deter attacks. As the African-American family spoke with these brave social justice activists they discovered that almost all of them were members of that suburban UU church. They got to know one another, and after things calmed down, that family joined the church. Unitarian Universalists are made not born; we can make more by living our faith.

Growing our diversity is a challenge, but it is happening, and when it does we know it is right and it feels good. We have worked to be more tolerant of differing ideas and theologies; and now we enjoy our theological and intellectual diversity as demonstrated in our love of discussion, our UU spiritual discipline. We are meeting the challenge and changing to include more people in our Universalism. For example, we developed the Welcoming Congregation program and now warmly welcome people who are different, a minority, in terms of their gender identity and sexual orientation. It took several years of discussion but most of our churches proudly display a Rainbow Flag. Now our new UUA President Morales is calling us to match our theological and intellectual diversity with cultural diversity.

To do this, we need to be clear on our purpose, why we are here in this religious community. Isn't it to open our hearts as well as our minds? Isn't it to strengthen our spirits so we can soar, be empowered together to make the world a better place? Isn't it to practice our religion? I didn't know my purpose; I didn't know how to practice my religion with the African American Bone Marrow Donor Board; we need to be clear on how and why we should grow our diversity.

There are many reasons for growing our diversity several were mentioned in the readings this morning, let me cite five briefly. One, we have been welcomed to this banquet feast, this smorgasbord of faith, and the polite thing to do in return is to welcome others. Two, ours is a liberating faith and with our freedom comes a responsibility to share it with others. Three, living our faith, affirming the "inherent worth and dignity" of everyone and demonstrating unity in diversity, we are modeling, creating right here on earth the caring community that is the beginning of that better world. Four, growing our diversity will lead to more peace and wholeness for society and for us personally through our own spiritual transformation, enabling us to feel the love that is the greatest gift of life, empowering us to live lives that are free from fear, full of hope.

Fifth, growing our diversity is what we need to do if we are to carry our faith into the future. Our new President Morales says, "We are not reconciled to being a declining part

of the American religious life. We have too much to offer. This world needs our prophetic and compassionate voice.” President Morales points out that Americans today 70 years and older are three-quarters white; whereas, Americans today 10 years old and younger are one-quarter white. How will we fit into the future? Will we exist? Will we be a club for upper middle class white liberals, a sanctuary from the diversity of society, or a church, a caring community that is deepening and living their faith, pursuing the inclusive vision of love and justice?

We have been given a great faith, a faith in the goodness of life and the human potential to make it better. We can take inspiration from our UU traditions. Growing out of the radical wing of the Reformation, trying to live the religion of Jesus, many of the early Polish Unitarians lived communally; nobles sold assets and lived with peasants; here is a piece of rock from the last of their communal buildings, which still stands in Rakow. John Murray and the Universalists of Gloucester welcomed Gloster Dalton, an African brought to America as a slave then freed, as a founding member of the first Universalist Church. Where is Our Holy Church?, as hymn number 113 asks? It is right here, “Where race and class unite as equal persons in the search for beauty, truth, and right.”

We have all been welcomed into UUism. Our religion is calling us not for its own survival, but to honor the beautiful diversity of creation of which we are a part. Let’s make room at the welcome table. Let’s change a little and broaden our culture. Ray Baughan, a Unitarian minister, wrote, “When people turn from the table where bread is broken and candles glow, be sure you have invited them not to your house but to their own, and offered not your wisdom but your love.” That is what our religion calls us to do: Love, reach out, find unity in diversity.

Adlai Stevenson, a Unitarian layperson, wrote, “I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there is nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian [Universalist], but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one’s own; in encouraging the free inter-change of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life....”

This is what we are called to do: practice radical hospitality, show people we care, welcome “fresh approaches to the problems of life”. Our theology, which affirms the unity of life and the efficacy of love and reason, will help us transcend our limitations and transform our congregations into models of religious community.

Growing our diversity is a challenge, but we do not have to do this work alone. The UUA is experimenting and learning how to be more effective. To grow our diversity we need to be clear on our purpose, we need to be more welcoming, and we need to reach out to help others, to show we care. For example, by Standing on the Side of Love, as thousand of UUs are doing all over the country, and as we are doing here today as we gather to raise funds to grow our diversity.

This Association Sunday special collection will provide adult education materials to help us understand racism and multiculturalism, support our ministers of color and the congregations that call them (which I know is important to you), and provide ministry for the increasing number of children of color and their families in our churches. Your gifts will help grow our faith into the future. We hope every congregation will contribute an average of \$50 per member. Here is my check for \$250.

Please give generously, thank you, and amen.