

**BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIVERSITIES:**  
**Different Beliefs and Spiritualities**  
**Summer Sermon Series, Part 1 of 4**  
**The Rev. Melanie Morel-Ensminger**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill**  
**Sunday, August 7, 2005**

Perhaps the most commonly asked question of Unitarian Universalists has to do with our diversity. After we explain that we have no creedal test for membership, then it comes: “How can you be a church if you don’t all believe the same things?” Often, even longtime UUs feel at a loss to reply. In a world where differences can be deadly, where people who disagree on matters of religion, politics, and experience can resort to lethal violence, it is imperative that a religious movement that prides itself on diversity lead the way to showing how human beings can not only get along but build community across chasms of difference. This sermon and the ones that follow in our August sermon series attempts to craft answers to the question, answers that will hopefully help us to deal with difference in the wider world as well.

In “Engaging Our Theological Diversity,” the report of the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, released at General Assembly in Fort Worth, UUs voiced their affirmation of diversity. Some specifically mentioned “acceptance and encouragement of diversity” as part of their congregation’s mission statement. One minister praised diversity, saying, “Diversity means embracing otherness and in so doing, becoming whole.” Affirming diversity recognizes that no one person or viewpoint is completely right or has all the final answers. By saying diversity is a good thing for UU congregations, we acknowledge that we need each other and our differences in our search for truth and meaning.

Some might think that dealing with diversity of belief is new for Unitarian Universalism, that in an earlier time, when the two denominations were separate, perhaps, or when they were both explicitly Christian, that there was no need to have conversations about getting along with different beliefs. You might be surprised to find out how long we’ve been dealing with theological diversity. In the 1700s, Universalism was rocked by controversy between those who believed there was no hell, and those who believed hell was only a temporary place of punishment. In the 1800s, Unitarians were divided over whether you could remain in the fold if you didn’t believe that Jesus performed miracles. Throughout our history we have been theologically diverse, and that diversity is increasing. The Commission on Appraisal says, “The range of theological views represented in our congregations is certainly wider than ever before.” That situation is not likely to change – in fact, in all likelihood, we will become even more diverse in years to come.

In the past, diversity of belief meant arguments over fine points of Christianity, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought new conflict in the form of the humanist-theist debate, between those who didn’t and did find meaning in a concept of God. By the time of the Commission of Appraisal of the American Unitarian Association in 1936, the controversy was in full swing; 27 years later, the Commission’s report made clear that tensions between the 2 camps had not been smoothed at the time of merger between the Unitarians

and Universalists. I find 2 things interesting in the 2005 Commission report about what makes up our theological diversity today.

First, UU congregations are made up of people holding a wide variety of religious beliefs. Joining the various stripes of liberal Christianity that make up our historic core and the humanism from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been Judaism, Buddhism, Native American spirituality, African spirituality, neo-paganism, Hinduism, Taoism, feminist spirituality, natural theism, process theology, and many others. Humanism has also diversified, so that there are now atheist, agnostic, and even mystic humanists among us. To further complicate matters that were complicated already, there are UUs whose spirituality can only be described by a hyphen: UU-Buddhists, Jewish-pagans, or, as in my own case, Christian-Buddhist-Humanist-Pagan.

Thus, the first dilemma for Unitarian Universalists is that if you value this rich cornucopia of spiritual diversity, there is no other religious home for you. Oh sure, a person who is only Christian has Christian churches to choose from, and those who are resolutely opposed to hearing anything religious on Sundays have the Ethical Culture Society, and someone committed to the *dharma* could join a Buddhist *sangha* – but those who combine insights from a variety of traditions, and those who are dedicated to the truths that can only be discerned in a community made up of those with different religious beliefs have nowhere else to go.

Second, the Commission on Appraisal found, in extensive interviews conducted over several years, that there is no “majority” or consensus theological position in the UUA at this time. Moreover, there is no theological group that feels that it’s the mainstream; instead, each and every theological group who talked with the Commission – humanists, pagans, Jews, Buddhists, Christians – all spoke of being marginalized in the UUA and in their home congregations. So the second irony is heartbreaking: people of nearly every theology in UUism have no other place to go – and yet don’t feel completely at home here either.

Conflicts in UU congregations over which theology is the “right” one or which language can be tolerated or which holidays can be celebrated turns Sunday mornings into a battleground. Some UUs insist on an imagined right to never hear what offends them. In moments of anger, some UUs have told other UUs, “You’re not a real UU” or “You don’t belong here.” The Commission on Appraisal report is blunt:

If we truly honor our UU Principles, we cannot simply fight for freedom of religion “out there” without fighting for it “in here.” Theological apartheid has no place in the practice of...religion.

So what are we to do? How do we unite all these Humanists, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Pagans, and hyphenates? The Commission on Appraisal report has a lot of suggestions, and I strongly recommend that everyone interested in the future of Unitarian Universalism read it. What follows here is a combination of the Commissions’ ideas and mine on how we can build bridges across the theological divide.

First, I believe we as individuals and as a movement will not be able to deal with our diversity until we have made peace with our religious past. Even though both Unitarianism and Universalism began as liberal Christian denominations, and even though

UU worship remains culturally Protestant in almost all congregations, theological reactivity is prevalent in UUism around our Christian origins, and around the use of scripture and the celebration of Christian holidays. Interestingly, the Commission notes that most UUs would rather celebrate an obscure holiday of a non-Western tradition, or hear readings from a foreign holy book than take positive notice of the historical roots of our own faith – a trend the report labeled “exoticism.”

The oversensitivity arises in most cases from past negative religious experiences in a Christian context. But unless we make peace with our past, and release our feelings of anger and betrayal, we will be trapped, unable to embrace a positive religious identity, and always on the alert against anything that reminds us of what hurt us. To reconcile with our past, we need not become the old faith again, only give up our denial about what Unitarian Universalism is and where we came from. Rejecting our origins in Christianity cuts us off from the wisdom in that tradition, and makes coalition-building in our local communities more difficult – and renders us less than welcoming to those seekers whose journey has not brought them to dismissing the Christian path.

Speaking of welcoming, I believe that Unitarian Universalism needs to practice radical hospitality. Our spiritual forebears were once quite literally “the other” – estranged from their old religion, outsiders and misfits in their environment, often losing livelihoods, security, relationships, and even their lives. In a real sense, we UUs were all once strangers in the land of Egypt and it ought to be part of our liberal faith today that we welcome the stranger. The Commission report says, “Hospitality takes people beyond their personal boundaries. It demands reaching out past discomfort, as though the empty seat next to you...belongs to the stranger.” We need that kind of hospitality in our churches, in our movement, and in our world, if we truly want to be welcoming and if we truly want to be leaders in peacemaking.

Finally, we need to listen to our mamas and talk things out with each other politely. The Commission on Appraisal found that in most surveyed congregations, conversations about theology and beliefs hardly ever happened, because people were afraid that having such a conversation would cause conflict and painful disagreement. The Commission concludes:

Sweeping UU theological diversity under the rug by refusing to talk about it in community is not a healthy way to approach the issue. Tolerance requires conversation, not avoidance. Talking about beliefs, learning from one another, and stimulating everyone’s thinking through open and honest sharing of views should be encouraged in congregational life. Without open dialogue, the diversity that exists within the community cannot [further personal growth].

Here in Cherry Hill, we have already begun to have structured community conversations about beliefs in our Fellowship Groups, where participants are both free and safe to express what they believe about a wide variety of topics of ultimate concern. UU youth groups are famous for their dialogues where deepest-held beliefs are shared; UU adults could learn from the youth and find more ways to hold respectful conversations on matters of religious belief, free of insult, generalizations, and dismissal. In this way, we would understand each other better and build a stronger community – and model for the world how people of differing religious beliefs can bond together in love and respect.

When representatives of different theological groups in the UUA were interviewed by the Commission, each was asked about their dream for Unitarian Universalism. Would it surprise you to learn that all the visions were remarkably similar, featuring warm community and work for justice? We are more alike than different.

“How can you be a church if you don’t all believe the same things?” By practicing hospitality, honoring our past, and respectfully talking and listening to each other, that’s how. **So might this be for this church, and our world! AMEN – ASHE – SHALOM – SALAAM – NAMASTE – BLESSED BE!**

## **BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIVERSITIES: Political Differences**

**Summer Sermon Series, Part 2 of 4**

**The Rev. Melanie Morel-Ensminger**

**Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill**

**Sunday, August 14, 2005**

This sermon series is entitled “Building Bridges Across Diversities”

and is intended to help us, as a congregation and as individuals, to create a strong pluralistic community, to see our congregational diversity in terms of theology, life experience, and politics as a source of strength and power.

Last Sunday we looked at how we can be one congregation even though we are made up of many different theological beliefs. Today’s sermon examines what may be the most difficult diversity of all: political difference.

To give you a few examples of the extent of the challenge, when I announced this sermon topic, parishioners had various reactions. “Good luck finding any UU Republicans” one said jocularly. “Is it possible to be a real UU and be a Republican? Doesn’t it go against the UU principles?” sincerely asked another.

There’s an old joke about a preacher who when asked if he believed in baptism, replied, “Believe in it! Why, I’ve seen it done!” I don’t have to believe in the concept of UU Republicans, I’ve seen it done. The congregation I served in Tennessee had Republican members; the Worcester, Massachusetts, UU congregation that Eric and I visited last year is majority Republican; and there are Republicans right here in the Cherry Hill congregation. In fact, I’m on rather intimate terms with a UU Republican, since I happen to be married to one. It is also perfectly possible to be UU and Green, or UU and Independent, or UU and Socialist – I’ve seen it done.

As we know, Unitarian Universalism has no central dogma or doctrine to hold our religious community together, and therefore many different religious beliefs and spiritual traditions are part of UU congregations, this one included. But while diversity is a positive core value for many UUs, diversity in itself is not enough to hold a religious community together. For drawing closer together, people seek communality, not difference, and as the report from the Commission on Appraisal of the UUA has noted, our UU commonalities are subtle and easily missed or ignored. In far too many cases, Unitarian Universalists who would never stand for a creedal test of membership seek the unity they crave by imposing a political litmus test instead. I constantly tell newcomers, “No matter what you hear, Unitarian Universalism is not the religious arm of the Democratic Party.”

Critics of Unitarian Universalism, both from within and without, have pointed out this tendency as one of our movement’s flaws. Certain religious conservatives have dismissed us as merely a social and political club, and not a religion at all. On a regular basis, letters to the editor of the UU World magazine complain about a pervasive assumption

in UUism that we're all Democrats. The Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, minister of 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Church in Austin, Texas, goes so far as to refuse to call himself a UU minister, saying the term is bankrupt. In a provocative essay for this spring's issue of The Journal of Liberal Religion, entitled "Why 'Unitarian Universalism' Is Dying," he writes, "[P]olitics replaced religion as the shared center of Unitarians and Universalists in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and remains their shared center today. If this is seldom mentioned, it may be because it's just too obvious."

If you are one of those UUs who think it would be hard to hold Unitarian Universalist religious beliefs and vote Republican, then you are unwittingly part of the problem. There is nothing in the UU principles that specifies a particular political party; Republicans, Democrats, Greens, Socialists, and Independents can all agree with them. You do not have to be a political or even a social liberal to be a religious liberal, although in some UU congregations this would be hard to prove.

In America today, what passes for political debate among the various camps often degenerates into insult and derision. Republicans are fascists and Democrats are traitors; Greens are naïve and Independents can't make up their minds. It's worse when this ugliness happens in Unitarian Universalist congregations, because we are called by our 1<sup>st</sup> principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, our 3<sup>rd</sup> principle of acceptance of one another, and our 5<sup>th</sup> principle of the democratic process, to act very differently. There's no escape clause in the UU principles that says, "The foregoing is null and void if someone disagrees with you politically." Our covenants with our life partners would never work if our pledge of fidelity had a hidden trap door, "I promise to be faithful to you – unless I feel attracted to someone else." As a covenantal community, we have made promises to each other – about valuing and accepting each other and abiding by the democratic process – and these promises can only be meaningful if kept under challenging circumstances, as in those painful times when we disagree.

Last week, I spoke about how the Commission on Appraisal had found in the interviews they conducted for their report that many if not most UUs were reluctant to talk about their religious beliefs in their congregations, fearing conflict and misunderstanding. It seems strange and ironic to me that, to avoid controversy, UUs would steer clear of theology and instead embrace politics – not to mention that it lends credence to those critiques that we would rather be involved with politics than religion.

I've said before that I come from a long line of Democrats. My father's father was a minor elected official in New Orleans after World War II, and my mother's Italian immigrant father in Woodbine, New Jersey, voted Democrat in every election since the granting of his citizenship. I've voted for a Republican exactly twice in my life. So how did this dyed-in-the-wool congenital Democrat come to marry an equally committed Republican? The easy answer is that we love each other. The more complicated answer is that we know when to stop talking. We've accepted that it's impossible for one of us to convert the other (or we've just about accepted it). We rejoice that in all the world we've found each other, agreeing on so many important things, having so many commonalities, loving each other so much, and we've decided to forgive each other for having the "wrong" political opinions. We keep saying, If James Carville and Mary Matalin can do it, so can we.

And ideally that's how we can do it in UU congregations when dealing with political differences – emphasize in our commonalities, forgive each other, and hold open respectful conversations without name-calling or generalizations. For, in the end, if a religious community dedicated to pluralism and diversity can't deal with political difference, what hope is there? **AMEN – ASHE – SHALOM – SALAAM – NAMASTE – BLESSED BE!**

**BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIVERSITIES:  
DIFFERENT LIFE EXPERIENCES  
Summer Sermon Series, Part 3 of 4  
The Rev. Melanie Morel-Ensminger  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill  
Sunday, August 21, 2005**

Each August, our worship services are linked together by a common theme. Our summer sermon series this year addresses the complicated issues surrounding the UU ideal of diversity, and hopefully points the way for us to deal better with difference in our congregations so that we are better able to deal with difference in the shrinking global world. Last Sunday, we looked at political differences among UUs, to remind us that being a religious liberal does not necessarily mean being a political or social liberal. The Sunday before that, we discussed how to get along with those people whose theology or religious beliefs differ from our own. Today, we examine how different experiences of life affect our perspectives, and how we can build bridges of community to those whose lives have taken different paths than ours. Next week, we will end the series with some general ideas on how to get along and create strong community without being threatened by various kinds of difference. That final sermon, fittingly enough, is entitled “Crossing Over.”

*“Do we merely tolerate diversity or can we truly celebrate it?”* The query posed by the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association in its report published in May of this year might be called the \$64,000 question for our liberal religious movement, and can be seen as the unifying theme for this sermon series. We Unitarian Universalists are proud of the diversity, the wide points of view in terms of spirituality and philosophy, and, to a certain extent, politically, represented among us in our congregations, and yet there is some evidence to indicate both that we may not be as diverse as we like to think we are, and that our diversity is not very well accepted among many Unitarian Universalists.

This week, I had a conversation with a parishioner about this sermon series, who told me that Unitarian Universalism in general and this sermon series in particular makes entirely too much of difference. “You could have shortened this whole sermon series,” this congregant said to me, “if you just said that the best way to deal with any difference is to ignore it!” Part of me wants to agree – part of me gets so tired and frustrated from trying to figure out if unintended actions or words of mine have caused offense or pain or misunderstanding with another person that I understand very well the impulse to blurt out, “Oh just get over yourself!” Why don’t we just ignore differences? Why can’t we all, in the immortal phrase of Rodney King, just get along?

The fact is, how we act and react, the choices we make, the style of our interactions with others, the way our minds work, how we interpret to ourselves what happens to us, are all deeply affected by who we are, whether we are male or female or intersexed; black or white or Latino or Asian or Native American; young, middle-aged, or old; working class, middle class or upper middle class; straight or gay or bisexual; hail from the Caribbean, the South, the Northeast, the Midwest, or the West; are college or university or high school graduates (or not). To minimize or deny the very real effects on a person’s life of these differences would be to ignore or devalue important parts of another person.

When people tell me to just ignore difference, I usually respond, “I wouldn’t like it if someone told me they just saw me as a human being – I’m a woman, and I want to be recognized as a woman.” There is no such thing as a generic human being – and I daresay we wouldn’t like it if there were.

Our life experiences help form our identity; everything that happens to us is filtered through the lens of our particular history and location, so that the exact same event can have vastly different implications and interpretations for different people, depending on their age, gender, and relationship. For example, a pat on the backside from a parent to a toddler is one thing; from one basketball player to another during a game is another; between intimate partners in private is yet another; and the same act done by a male supervisor to a female employee means something else entirely. So while I might get weary sometimes, navigating the treacherous currents of difference and diversity, the other part of me recognizes that the best way to honor the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” is to affirm people in all their glorious and aggravating particularity, which means taking note of such things as gender, race, age, economic class, sexual orientation, culture and educational level.

While Unitarian Universalism has made great strides in dealing with sexism, and incorporating women into leadership roles, and while we are acknowledged as a leader in religious circles for our Welcoming Congregation program and the number of “out” gay and lesbian ministers in our ranks, we still have a long way to go on race and culture and class. With the exception of those few remaining downtown urban churches, UU adult congregations are overwhelmingly white, and the main reason that UU Sunday Schools are slightly more racially diverse is more due to transracial adoptions than to any positive outreach efforts being made. In terms of age, we are not doing very well there either – one unkind wag has called the UUA General Assembly “a gathering of Q-tips” for all the white and grey heads present. The Commission on Appraisal report addresses the tender issue that so many young people raised UU leave the denomination after their time in Sunday School is over. While most UU’s would rather die than be caught making a sexist or racist remark or joke, it’s still OK in most congregations to disparage or make fun of rednecks and Southerners, and it’s the rare UU sermon that is not chock-full of multisyllabic “50 cent” words, successfully shutting out anyone without a graduate-level vocabulary. And don’t even mention military experience – a lot of the time, it seems the only veterans who would be comfortable in a UU church are those who have turned against the military.

Wanting diversity and talking about are not enough; we must move towards being truly welcoming. And welcoming diversity and the richness and complexity that different life experiences can bring to a congregation is not easy. It can be tricky to discern how best to make another person feel welcomed and affirmed, especially if that person is different in some significant way from you. The discomfort we all feel when confronted by difference may well be hard-wired – that is, it may have developed in our brain and nervous system through the process of evolution that we view a person from outside our own tribe as possibly dangerous and thus we go on the alert. Even so, we can train ourselves to be more comfortable – or at least to better tolerate being uncomfortable.

One thing we can train ourselves to do is limit how much we think of ourselves and our particular situation as the norm. Sure, who and what we are is normal for **us**, but

that doesn't mean it has to be assumed as normal for everyone else. Let's face it, the other person may well be thinking that we're the strange ones, for being different from them. Another helpful technique is to resist the temptation to generalize. Having met one Italian doesn't mean you know what all Italians are like; not all lesbians think alike, nor do all truckdrivers, people of color, or teenagers. Don't even generalize about Unitarian Universalists – that's especially dangerous. I like to tell newcomers that almost any sentence beginning, "All UUs agree that..." is a falsehood. We can stop and think twice about telling those ethnic or regional jokes, or making those insulting characterizations of other places or other cultures. The best thing we can do is to be genuinely interested in another person, regardless of – or perhaps, because of – their differences from us, to ask sincere questions, and to deeply listen to the answers without trying to formulate a rejoinder.

Another parishioner, referring to this series, complained, "We'll have nothing to say to each other, since we can't say this, we can't that." Of course, that's an exaggeration. We'll always have lots to say to each other, questions to ask about our journeys, about how we got here and how we feel about it, what moves us and touches our hearts, what makes us strong and gives us courage, what gives us comfort, what makes us feel less afraid in those dark nights of the soul that each one of us goes through. We can always share the reasons we looked for a religious home and what we thought when we first found Unitarian Universalism. In sharing our stories, by respectfully and deeply listening to each other, I feel sure that we will discover that we are more alike than different, that no matter what outward diversity may be obvious, there is an underlying unity that may not be easily seen but can be uncovered through authentic relationship and through shared common work to make the world better.

Look around you – in this congregation, right now, are people of different gender, different orientation, different race or ethnicity, different education, different economic level. And yet, we are all here, in this church, sharing this worship service as one congregation, which, incidentally, we probably do not share a common opinion about. What is important in Unitarian Universalism is not that we always agree or that at the least we suppress or keep to a minimum our disagreements (which never works anyway) – but that we value each other as the unique and treasured gift of creation we are, and that we value the diversity in our congregation and in UUism as a precious resource that makes us strong. Biologists tell us that the healthier the environment, the more biodiversity is present. Let us re-member that the more diverse we are as a religious community, the stronger and healthier we are. **So might this be! AMEN – ASHE – SHALOM – SALAAM – NAMASTE – BLESSED BE!**

## **BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS DIVERSITIES:**

**Crossing Over & Meeting Halfway**

**Summer Sermon Series, Part 4 of 4**

**The Rev. Melanie Morel-Ensminger**

**Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill**

Sunday, August 28, 2005

All this month, we've been looking deeply into the topic of diversity within Unitarian Universalism and in this church. While diversity is generally acknowledged among religious liberals as a good – some UU congregations have even put the goal of inclusiveness and diversity in their Mission Statements – there is no doubt that differences can be uncomfortable and can cause conflict. This is a conundrum that begs to be solved.

To work our way through this ironic dilemma, during the month of August we have examined some particular kinds of difference that tend to cause problems both large and small in UU congregations – differences of theology and spirituality, differences of political stance, differences of life experience, which would include such things as gender, race, age, economic class, occupation, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and military background, but would not be limited only to the differences listed. Our purpose has been to learn to build bridges across the seeming canyons of diversity that tend to keep us divided and separate and alienated. My feeling is that if we UUs can develop these bridges here in our own congregation, then we can apply these new skills in the wider world, and make alliances with people of different faiths and different backgrounds and different cultures, and vastly increase our circle of influence in the world. In a world torn apart by difference, where diversity can be deadly, learning how to be welcoming and inclusive in an increasingly pluralistic global village might turn out to be a world-saving talent.

In each sermon, we've talked about ways to cope with our feelings of discomfort around difference, developing ways of relating to each other that are more welcoming and more sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those around us. Sometimes the sermons might have sounded a little repetitious, since the warning signs are the same for each difference we looked at. For example, for the past 3 Sundays, I've reminded us about avoiding generalizations about any group or category, since they are inevitably false and misleading. I've asked us all to be more aware when we are using insulting terms when we do disagree. And I've repeatedly asked us to remember that our personal situation is not the measure of the world – that what is normal and right for us is not necessarily normal and right for others.

Several of you have asked me this month about alternate methods of communication. One person cried out plaintively, "Tell me things to say!" The first part of bridge-building is what not to say, and some examples are easy. Almost all of us realize that the question, "How old are you?" is rude and intrusive for anyone over 10, but few of us have gotten to the point where we know we shouldn't ask, "What do you do?" – a question that can be painful and embarrassing for a person recently fired, or who has been looking fruitlessly for work for months. "Are you married?" can be insulting to a heterosexual single woman, but it is downright excruciating to a lesbian who's been partnered

for decades and is unable legally to wed. “How long have you been here?” is a good question to ask if you mean how long has someone been coming to church, but it is a bad question if you mean that the person seems foreign and you want to know how long they have been in the United States. “Tell me how you came to think that” is a good conversation opener; “How can any sensible/compassionate person believe that???” is a conversation killer.

Second, know your own motives and be honest about your goals when engaging with another person. Ask yourself, *“What do I truly want from this interaction? What do I want for this relationship?”* and if you want friendship and increased understanding on both sides, act accordingly. (Of course, if your desired end result is a burned bridge, then go ahead and act any way you want, without regard for the other person’s feelings.)

The third and very important plank in bridge-building is remembering that we all need each other – yet another thing I’ve said before in this series. As Unitarian Universalists, we come from a religious tradition that has always insisted that human knowledge is perforce partial, that, as St. Paul wrote, “Now we see as through a dark mirror.” In acknowledging in all humility that we don’t know everything, we open ourselves to needing the insights and perspectives of others who know things that we don’t know, who have had experiences we haven’t had. And yet it is so tempting to treat each other with disrespect on the grounds that we have differing points of view. In the September-October issue of Sojourners magazine, Brian McLaren writes:

I don’t agree with the tone of the conservative author who offers advice on how to talk to a liberal “if you must,” suggesting that it’s an odious task that one must do while pinching her nose. Nor do I agree with any liberal mirror image who sees all conservatives as equally stinky conversation partners.

The next plank in our bridge over diversity is to hold conversations with the solitary goal of understanding another person, of knowing them more deeply and more truly. If our secret agenda in speaking with someone who is different is to convince them how wrong they are and how right we are, then we are doomed to perpetual failure and disappointment. If every time I talked politics with my husband Eric I really expected him to have a sudden epiphany and become a liberal Democrat, we’d have to quit having political conversations altogether. The atheists in our congregation are not going to convince the theists that there is no God; the folks who are pacifist are not going to sway those who believe that war is sometimes regrettably necessary. Let’s accept right now that we are not going to convert each other, not going to change each other’s minds, and start trying to understand and accept each other.

The fifth plank in our span is seeking common ground. Instead of constantly butting heads on the things we disagree on, let us dig deeper and find our areas of agreement and accord. In almost every case, we share common values and common concerns; every human being treasures their close relationships, wants to feel safe, desires to be cared for, needs stimulation of mind and body, appreciates beauty as they see it, and looks for spiritual satisfaction, however they define it. Let’s talk about what we share, and those things we agree on more often, and let’s seek to find the parts of another person’s position that we can affirm, instead of looking for the flaws to attack.

A good way to look for those commonalities is to tell stories instead of debating. Once we know how a person came to be who they are and think the way they do, we are much less likely to go on the attack. In a strong community committed to pluralism, the *why* and *how* of a person become much more vital and important than the *what*. We begin to phrase our questions differently, less accusingly. “Tell me why that’s so important to you.” “What experience did you have that led you to believe that?”

Speaking of stories, the final plank in our bridge across diversities is the stories we tell ourselves about other people and their motivations. When we are calm and relatively happy, we tell ourselves stories that explain the other person we’re disagreeing with as good-hearted, intelligent, sensitive, and caring – just at the moment maybe rushed or stressed or in error. But when our own stress buttons get pushed, when we feel threatened or at risk, the stories we tell ourselves about what is happening go in another direction. Then the other person has bad intentions, lacks compassion, is stupid and unfeeling, even evil. When building bridges, we must be careful not to assume that we are the only ones who are good and smart and caring.

This final sermon in the Building Bridges series is entitled “Crossing Over & Meeting Halfway,” because any bridge is useless unless people are willing to use it, to take those first hesitant steps to cross to the other side. I hope that we are committed to the idea of being not only bridge-builders, but bridge crossers. A First-Year Study/Action Issue voted on at this June’s General Assembly is entitled “Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society.” We would be hypocritical in the extreme to be concerned with how pluralism will work in the world if we are not also concerned with how well we deal with diversity internally.

The Commission on Appraisal of the UUA issued a final challenge at the close of its 2005 report, distributed at General Assembly in Fort Worth. Let it serve as a coda to this sermon series:

What could our UU faith be like if our congregations truly became the safe and welcoming place we aspire to create? If we truly did honor and celebrate both our diversity and our sources of unity? If we were willing to commit to spiritual discipline as deeply as to spiritual freedom?

What indeed. **AMEN – ASHE – SHALOM – SALAAM – NAMASTE – BLESSED BE!**