

People Are Not all the Same: Inherent Worth and Abundant Variety

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, August 13, 2023

UU Society of Sacramento

Reading from Adrian L. H. Graham (printed at end). Reflection by (printed at end).

Hymns: #305 De Colores; #159 This Is My Song; #121 We'll Build a Land

Chalice Lighting Words

by Adrian L. H. Graham, a UU church staff member in Rockville, Maryland

We kindle a flame of power,

illuminating the Holy in each of our faces.

We recognize in the flame a passionate commitment
to our shared faith [and values].

We are held and carried from day to day, week to week, in the shining of the light.

This flame is mine, as well as yours.

We are brought together on this day, called to growth, to expansion, within its glow.

What does your heart know while beholding this holy fire?

Sermon

Today's world is challenging and confusing. The future is uncertain and scary. Things change faster than we can keep up. Discomfort is inevitable, even in a congregation. So it's worth remembering that a Unitarian Universalist congregation does not sustain itself by promoting a uniform state of comfort. Comfort is only a feeling, it's not a principle. It's not a value. No, we are sustained by our sense of covenant. A covenant, simply, is a promise, a commitment. In a community like this one, this means a commitment to living by our shared values. We can find courage in doing this not alone, but together.

Six decades ago, when the individual Universalist and Unitarian denominations merged into one, they adopted a set of principles around which our congregations could unite. One of them was "To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, [and] the dignity of man."¹ That was in 1961. In 1984, we adopted revised wording which was gender-inclusive. Since then, we have said that our congregations "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."²

This feels obvious to many of us, and perhaps even comfortable to proclaim. Yet if we're too comfortable with it, we can lull ourselves into thinking that it means that people are all the same. The weakness of thinking that people are all the same is that we are not spiritually or emotionally prepared when people surprise us with their differences. To say that people are all the same is a myth which puts at risk anyone who is outside the dominant culture.

I've been thinking about this since I read an article in the *Atlantic* magazine by Dara Horn, who is Jewish. She describes the rapid growth in the field of Holocaust education. Over the past 50 years, many Holocaust museums, education centers, and speakers' bureaus were established not only because of the Nazi genocide, but also in response to antisemitic events in local communities in the years since then. Consequently, 25 state governments now mandate Holocaust education in schools. To the folks working for such programs, the goal is to increase tolerance, reduce hatred and stop violence.

Unfortunately, as Horn points out, antisemitism has been accelerating in recent years. So have acts of intimidation of other groups who differ from the dominant white culture. Horn writes: “I could fill pages with FBI hate-crime statistics, or with a list of violent attacks from the past six years or even the past six months, or with the growing gallery of American public figures saying vile things about Jews. Or I could share stories you probably haven’t heard, such as one about a threatened attack on a Jewish school in Ohio in March 2022—where the would-be perpetrator was the school’s own security guard. But none of that would capture the vague sense of dread one encounters these days in the Jewish community, a dread unprecedented in my lifetime.”³ End of quotation.

Most of our Holocaust education has failed to reduce intolerance, Horn argues, because it has failed to describe the centuries-old history of antisemitism that preceded the Holocaust. The fuel of intolerance is made up of ignorance, fear of difference, falsehoods, resentment, and scapegoating. But when Holocaust education gives no sense of what is distinctive about the textures of Jewish lives and cultures, it does nothing to remove that fuel. On social media like YouTube, conspiracy theories flourish which accuse Jewish leaders of having inordinate power and making plans to undermine our financial security and the safety of our children. Of course, spreading stuff like this puts *Jewish* children in danger. Such lies are not only similar to those of Germany from 90 years ago. They are like the same lies that have generated anti-Jewish violence *for centuries* in what we call Western civilization.

Much of Holocaust education tries to teach that people shouldn’t hate Jews, because Jews are “normal,” they are just like everybody else. Horn says this is part of the problem: “If someone doesn’t meet your version of ‘normal,’ then it’s fine to hate them. This framing perhaps explains why many victims of today’s American anti-Semitic street violence are visibly religious Jews—as were many of Europe’s Holocaust victims,” Horn says. At a book signing in Michigan, she met a Jewish man in a skullcap, or kippa. He told her that in the grocery store another man had rammed his cart, and then shouted, “The kosher bagels are in the other aisle.” On another day, he had taken his kids to a baseball game, where another fan pelted them with popcorn.

In January of 2017, Donald Trump’s White House issued a statement recognizing International Holocaust Remembrance Day. US presidents have done this for decades. Yet the statement issued in 2017 did not mention antisemitism or Jewish people. The White House didn’t name any categories of people, only “innocent victims.” That might seem to be inclusive, but consider that the Holocaust resulted from Nazi Germany’s official policy to solve what it called “the Jewish question.” The policy was called the Final Solution. Jews were its intended and primary targets. Given that the Trump administration was less than two weeks old then, one might assume this was an oversight; the statement was released in haste. Yet on the very same day, the Trump administration issued an Executive Order *slashing* the number of refugees to be allowed in the country, and banning all refugees from Syria, among other countries. During Trump’s campaign he had promised to have a “Muslim ban,” and so he did.⁴

Dara Horn writes that an experienced Holocaust educator she interviewed told her that many teachers in the field are wary of teaching about the connections between historical antisemitism and today’s expressions of it. That’s because they fear that “parents are going to call, or administrators are going to call, and say you’re pushing an agenda.” Isn’t the agenda to stop hatred, Horn asked? “In order to stop the dehumanizing of a group of people, shouldn’t we

humanize them?” Of course, this would apply to all groups who are misunderstood, lied about, and targeted.

Horn says that kids who draw swastika on a high school bathroom’s wall probably know about the Holocaust. But they probably don’t know much about Jewish people.

When I was in junior high, I learned about the Holocaust. I learned about the scale of the genocide—the images of people crammed in railroad boxcars, the death camps and gas chambers. But I didn’t learn much about Jewish history or culture until much later. In high school, I knew we had one Jewish boy, but I didn’t know *him*. All I heard about Jewish Americans came from crude remarks and stereotypes, which asserted as facts by my relatives and neighbors. Suspicion of Jewish business owners was a familiar theme—it’s centuries old. We knew better than to say it in their presence, of course. In my family, negative attitudes about others were not limited to Jews. We looked down on any group which we thought of as “not like us,” as “them.”

What led me gradually away from that kind of thinking was the struggle of coming to terms with the reality that I was a member one of those categories of “them.” In the early 1980s, I was in college when I began to come out of the closet as a gay person. I came out slowly, because I had heard so many ill-informed and hostile remarks from relatives, classmates, even some teachers. Since I could “pass” as not gay, the assumption that I was not gay made those close to me feel quite free to talk about “them” — with jokes and mocking of gay people, with expressions of disgust and fear. The message I got was this: If you are queer, don’t talk about it. Don’t make other people uncomfortable.

In college I made regular visits to the office of the academic advisor in one of my major departments, and we became friends. We became even closer after I started attending the local UU church, where I discovered that she and her husband were members. One Sunday at coffee hour, she was talking about her son and his girlfriend. Then she asked: “Do you have a girlfriend?” I paused. I thought. I said: “Well, I guess I haven’t told you before, but I’m gay.”

She said, “Oh, I didn’t know that. Well, gay people are okay. So long as they don’t flaunt it.” It was so easy for her to say “they,” because she wouldn’t have to show any interest in *me*, or in the particulars of life as a gay young adult in America. She wouldn’t have to practice curiosity or empathy. My interpretation of what she said was this: “Don’t talk to me about this too much. That would be flaunting it.” Normally I would have followed this instruction.

Instead, I said something like this: *Well, don’t you think it’s important for people to be open about who they are? Otherwise, we can’t make it safe for more people to come out.* “Well yes” she said. From that point, however, I tried not to make her uncomfortable again, and I didn’t really trust her. Since 1961, the Unitarian Universalist principles (to which our local church had made a commitment) had said that our congregations “affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality.” I guess it should have been more specific.

We can’t affirm the worth of every person only in the abstract. We can’t *mean it* if we are not able to open ourselves to the abundant variety of people in our world, in our communities, in our lives. To live by this value means living with discomfort. Discomfort arises when we encounter the many particular forms of human identity. The cure for discomfort is curiosity, paired with respect.

This is where spiritual practices can be helpful. As we heard from Courtney a few minutes ago, when we have strong reactions to a situation or to other people, instead of believing

those reactions, we can examine them. Instead of acting on them, we can take a deep breath, pause, and reflect. Then we can engage in the practice of curiosity. Courtney said she is learning that “feelings are just that – feelings. They’re not ‘fact.’ They are also transient.” She is reminding herself of the importance of taking time, and trying to understand her own reactions, before she acts or speaks.

Our *whole country* needs this kind of practice. We need this in order to inoculate ourselves from the assaults on decency and human dignity which seem to be accelerating. For example, state governors and many local school boards are suppressing education about the diversity of this country’s history. They have tried to pass laws that say that we should not make students uncomfortable by addressing the tragic aspects of our history, including laws and systems of racial oppression, which are part of our history and even part of our present day. Of course, discomfort is part of any learning process. So discomfort will arise when we learn more about the real world and the many people who live in it.

If we deprive students of the challenge of learning about, *and learning from*, the variety of people who share the world with us, we perpetuate ignorance. This generates more isolation and suspicion. We continue to talk about people we do not understand as “them.” We fall prey to the lies which lull us into accepting injustice. We put up with policies that separate people and hurt them.

To be sure, society has changed rapidly in the past few decades with regard to gender roles in families, and then with regard to the expression of different sexual orientations and gender identities. It can be confusing even if you *want* to keep up with it! Yet social confusion, misunderstanding, uncertainty, fear, and unease are the territory in which corrupt and authoritarian movements try to gain power.

Right now, around the country, governors and legislators are promoting and enacting laws aimed at adults and youth who are transgender. School teachers are banned from addressing students by the personal pronouns the students ask for. Some teachers have to report such a request to the parents. When transgender students are made to use the restroom of the gender opposite to the one with which they identify, they are at risk of ridicule or assault.

Parents who do support their transgender children are prohibited from obtaining any form of gender-affirming medical care when their children request it. In at least one state the parents can be charged with child abuse and have their youth removed from the family for supporting their transgender children. Many of these families are trying to flee states that are passing such laws. People in more open states are taking them in, as refugees.

The Reverend Cecilia Kingman is a UU minister who studies fascistic movements *and their tactics*. In a lecture she gave at our ministerial gathering in June, Kingman made the case that the assaults on trans people and their families are a trial balloon for fascist politicians in this country. By picking on one of the most vulnerable and misunderstood groups, they are watching to see how much resistance there is to it. But if they succeed, they won’t stop there.⁵ This is why right-wing authoritarians do not want us to learn about the varieties of human differences. They don’t want us to understand people we don’t know, much less accept or celebrate them.

In confronting assaults on human worth and human freedom, it is not enough to say: “We’re all the same; people are all the same.” To promote human dignity and safety, we must

learn about our human differences. To appreciate human variety, we need empathy, and empathy requires curiosity. Curiosity must be paired with respect.

The human species, our species, has an abundant variety. We are varied in cultures, habits, religious practices, occupations, and family structures. Humans have a variety of sexual orientations. We have gender identities not according to society's binary limitation, but along a broad spectrum. We have a variety of talents and abilities. Human traits vary among individuals and across geography, whether we're talking about continents or neighborhoods.

There is so much we don't understand about one another, and about one another's experience of life. So much remains for us to learn. There will always be more to learn about our abundant human variety. Doing so will cause discomfort, at the very least. In these troubling times, it will call for courage to assert the dignity of every human soul. It will require endurance to defend and celebrate the inherent worth of every person.

How blessed we are to remember that we are not alone in sharing this principle, not alone in sharing this commitment. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

Prayer

Holy Spirit of Life which breathes within us all, help us to experience the other and to be unafraid. Let not the bountiful ways that we are different cause us to be wary of one another/ but teach us to be mindful of the glorious array of humanity and to celebrate our worth as people together. -prayer by Adrian L. H. Graham.

Reading

This reading comes from Adrian L. H. Graham, an African American man. Earlier we heard his prayer and his words for the Chalice Lighting. In 1999, Adrian became a UU at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore. Now he serves on staff at the UU Church in Rockville, Maryland, as its Director of Congregational Engagement. He is preparing for the ministry.

After this reading we will take a few moments of silence together to let the words rest in our awareness. Then we will hear a personal reflection by Courtney, followed by music for reflection.

I remember once leaving a party, held at the house of some friends from church, and being told, "You shouldn't use the alleyways to get home." I had not been living in the city long, and I was in my early twenties. Everyone else at the gathering would have been older than I was, and most of them were white. All these years later, I no longer remember why we had gathered over a meal, or who was present; I only remember their concern over my well-being and their counsel that I should walk home by the well-lit streets of our downtown neighborhood.

I also remember being in the church office and being asked, "Why are you wearing your *nametag*?" Again, I don't remember the particular circumstance of the day—just that I was the only black person on the staff at the time, and the only man. It was an innocent enough question; and yet it stuck with me in its unknowing simplicity.

You see, I didn't have any fear of walking home through the alleyways all those years ago. As a young, black man, *I* was one that other people would be wary of in the dark. Other people would see me approaching, wearing my hoodie in the darkness, and they would clutch their purses. They would cross the street. They would not offer any "hello" in response to mine.

And when you're the only black man in a sea of whiteness, it doesn't matter that you're on staff. It doesn't matter that the keychain around your neck has the keys to every locked door. It doesn't matter

that the parking lot is well lit at night. Purses still get [held closely], and people still cross the street, and *hellos* still get lost in the void. My nametag is my validation/ and my shield.

People who know me personally often express shock and disbelief when I speak these truths to them. Because they know me. But you shouldn't have to know me to be unafraid.

Reflection by Courtney

I have been part of a book club for the past 15+ years; the women in this club are my closest, dearest friends. We meet monthly, and our discussions – which go for hours – always bounce back and forth between the book that we have all read and updates on each other's lives, discussions about pop culture, the current political climate, family life, etc.

At our most recent gathering a week ago, one of my compatriots shared her observations about that month's book. Her critique was an analysis that could be applied not just to the book itself, but also to life, politics, and social inequities. As she shared her criticisms, I felt myself reacting. I could feel my face flushing and defensiveness spreading throughout my body. I was upset – angry, even – that she was criticizing this book (a book I had absolutely loved). I felt that in some way, she was attacking me, in her criticism.

I knew in that moment that it was not a good idea to engage in a discussion or challenge her viewpoint. I was reactive, and wanted time to process my feelings. As she finished making her points, I focused on my breathing and thought, "I'll unpack this with myself later."

That evening, when I had time to process this experience, I kept coming back to my own reaction. Why had I reacted so strongly? Why did I take a different response to a book (even a book I loved) so personally? Was this a bigger issue I needed to address between me and my friend – or was this something I needed to be more reflective about in terms of my own responses?

These are questions I'm still asking. I'm still working through this experience, even a week or two later. But I'm actually glad this experience happened the way it did. Because it made me remember that I'm confronted by different viewpoints and different people all the time. We all are – that's part of what it means to go through this world, especially right now. We all have life experiences and opinions and inevitably, we engage with other people that look at the same issues differently. Sometimes those differing viewpoints are presented tactfully... and sometimes we disagree in debates or arguments, with anger or vitriol.

What I am learning from my book club experience is something that I hope I can remember when I'm out in the world, interacting with others, and inevitably meeting people who challenge my point of view. I'm learning that my feelings are just that – feelings. They're not "fact". They are also transient: the way I felt about the book club exchange later that evening was very different from how I felt about it when it was happening. My tendency has always been to react in the moment, for good or bad. But I'm trying to remind myself now of the importance of taking the time to sit with myself, to understand my own feelings better – before engaging with someone else. And, maybe most importantly, I'm trying to remember the importance of breathing, in the moment.

¹<http://archive.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/3645.shtml>

² The Seven Principles: <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

³ Dara Horn, "Is Holocaust Education Making Antisemitism Worse?", *The Atlantic*, May 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/05/holocaust-student-education-jewish-antisemitism/673488/>

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_13769#:~:text=Executive%20Order%2013769%20lowered%20the,whose%20countries%20do%20not%20meet

⁵ Cecilia Kingman, "My Little Pony Was Right: Reflections of Fascisms Without and Within," the 2023 Berry Street Essay, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, delivered in Pittsburgh, June 21, 2023. <https://uuma.org/berry-street-essay/2023-berry-street-essay-the-reverend-cecilia-kingman/>