Encountering the Differences in Diversity

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December 5, 2010

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How can we live together in peace and harmony? It's difficult to do when we're each hidden in our own secret chamber – and yet, that's the human condition. We are separate minds struggling to find a way not to be alone.

How can we speak together when none of us can fully understand another and no one is fully understood? It's so difficult to do that we have to keep working at it, striving toward a goal that we'll never reach. But it actually helps when we realize that we can never fully understand each other, because then we can turn our longing for certainty into a longing for harmony.

When we accept that we can never fully understand each other, we realize that there is a core of mystery, of ambiguity at the center of all our relationships. Then we can use communication to honor and explore that mystery instead of trying to eliminate it. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is uncomfortable with this mystery – that sees communication as a competitive process where someone's right means someone else's wrong.

America is a communication-challenged culture. We're a country that was born in vigorous debate, but we've lost much of our ability to conduct such discussions. Our national heritage is rich with images of town meetings where people spoke their minds, presented evidence supporting their positions, and were influenced by opposing viewpoints as they struggled to decide what to do.

But America has changed since then. Part of what made this kind of communication possible was a common culture of shared values and beliefs – basically, Protestant Christianity. In early America, the church was the center of community; the public square was its place of decision-making; and government was marginal, with a limited role.

But things have changed since then. America got bigger, and the voices of individuals have largely been drowned out by bigger government, and the even

louder voices of commerce and special interests. And as the population has grown more diverse, the marketplace and government have displaced religion as the central source of value.

Many people have realized that the old role of churches has outlived its purpose. There are too many points of view, too many moralities, too many special interests, too many cultures – America is simply too diverse for any one religion or church to claim that it possesses the values that define our society.

Many a burgeoning Unitarian Universalist grew up thinking that there was something wrong with their church, as it preached doctrines that seemed to contradict their experience. How many of you looked around at people during the Lord's Prayer, people who were saying "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"? When we knew they had absolutely no interest in forgiving anybody – that anger, resentment, and revenge were their real values?

This could get real confusing when we were threatened with eternal damnation and suffering if we didn't accept doctrines of love. When people who loved us shouted at us in anger for asking questions or disagreeing. When we struggled to find a way to feel good about ourselves in the face of a doctrine that said we were inherently evil and that our very thoughts and desires were bad. When they told us we needed to fall down and worship an all-powerful and judgmental God?

Many people who became Unitarian Universalists got that way by saying "no" to someone or something. They rejected the harsh judgmentalism of Christian doctrine. They rejected the hypocrisy that seemed to be such an integral part of their churches. They rejected the religiously-based doctrines that supported oppression and segregation. They said "no" to claims of factual authority based on a set of quasi-historical myths and folk-tales that were written thousands of years ago. They said "no" to demeaning theologies of worship that denied their inherent worth and dignity.

So Unitarian Universalists are people who can say "no". We protest, we boycott, we disagree. We criticize the dysfunctions and abuses of our culture and our government. The one biblical image with which we seem to identify the most is that of the Old Testament prophet, speaking truth to power, denouncing the

abuses of the powerful, calling for mercy and compassion for the downtrodden and disenfranchised.

But, as many of the rebels of the 1960's discovered, it's hard to maintain unity within a movement that is driven by a negative agenda. When we come together to say "no", it's difficult to say yes – even to each other. We can end up recreating some of the most intractable conflicts of our childhood churches.

Many Unitarian Universalists have been wounded for being different. When they come together to form a community where they can feel safe, they want to be free from exclusion and abuse. Freedom from abuse can seem like freedom from criticism. It's easy for Unitarian Universalists to fall into a politically correct tolerance of diversity, where people tolerate difference by not expressing their own, where everyone remains locked in their own separate, secret chamber.

But freedom from abuse is not the same thing as freedom from being disagreed with. Disagreement is an essential element of any vital community. Diversity means that people have different ideas and opinions. If they can't express their differences within their community, those differences can become private estrangements, bitternesses and resentments. When people can't be open with one another, they gradually drift apart, energy dissipates and enthusiasm fades. And a once-vibrant fellowship can become a lifeless shell.

How to manage cohesive harmony within a diverse culture may well be the greatest challenge facing America in the third millennium. Unitarian Universalism has a tremendously important role to play in answering that challenge. Because we have chosen to embrace diversity of opinion and belief as a central tenet of our faith, we are committed to finding a way to put that diversity into practice. We are the laboratory where the answers to the challenge of the third millennium are being discovered. It's up to us to show the way.

Mere restraint from argument isn't going to get the job done. There will always be people whose emotional investment in an issue is going to override their restraint. And you can end up with a room full of politely restrained people being dominated by the emotionally argued agendas of a small minority.

What we need is to learn how to speak to each other. We need to learn how to disagree with each other in ways that can lead to harmony instead of distance. Harmony is a condition where differences come together to create a thing of beauty. When you listen to music, notice that each instrument says different things in different ways – rhythm, pitch and timbre. The result is music – harmony, not unanimity.

In order to create harmony, we need to embrace difference, we need to be willing to be disagreed with – we need to recognize that disagreement is not a personal attack.

The comic strip, "Dilbert," demonstrated this difficulty a while ago. A co-worker hands Dilbert a piece of paper, a report of some kind. Dilbert looks at the paper and says, "These numbers look a little bit low." His co-worker immediately responds, "Aieee! Why are you attacking me?" Now, Dilbert's question could have meant a lot of different things. He could have been wondering about what caused the difference in the figures. It could have meant that last year's numbers were higher, or that he had simply expected them to be higher. He might have been wondering if the same formulas had been used to generate the report. He might have been wondering if some outside factors had affected the year's performance. He might even have wondered if some new competitor had been undermining their market position. We don't know what Dilbert was thinking. He just said, "These numbers look a little bit low." But the other person immediately took it as a personal attack.

How can we ever know what people's words and actions mean? After all, we don't have access to that private, secret chamber where motivation is known. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that sometimes we don't even know why we act the way we do. We usually just assume that we know what people mean; we attribute our own meanings to their actions.

The Dilbert example demonstrates a communication problem that's so commonplace that social psychologists have given it a name. They call it the "Fundamental Attribution Error." The fundamental attribution error refers to the way we tend to attribute motivations to others which we would not assume for ourselves. In this case it is the assumption of intentionality – that the outcome

you experience is what the other person intended. Therefore, if you are hurt, the other person was hurtful. Dilbert's co-worker felt injured by what he heard; therefore, he assumed that Dilbert intended to be hurtful. This is an error because there can be a million non-hurtful reasons why Dilbert spoke as he did – but his co-worker assumed the worst.

Another barrier to communication is the misunderstanding of our Unitarian Universalist principle of the right of individual conscience. Many people take this to mean that they're entitled to believe anything that they believe is true. This can lead them to think that any disagreement is a personal attack. But the right to hold an opinion is not the same thing as the right to not be disagreed with. Actually, when people with different opinions come together, honest relationship requires that they respectfully differ with one another. Respect doesn't mean silence; respect means refraining from contempt. It also means refraining from taking offense. When striving to create the beloved community, we need to bear in mind that we add just as much suffering to the world when we take offense as when we give offense.

Another barrier to effective communication is certainty. Certainty is the same thing as a closed mind. We just give it a different name when we have it. Other people may have closed minds; we are merely certain. But when we are certain about something, we are incapable of engaging in a productive discussion about it. We can only try to convince someone else that they are wrong. Real communication requires that we be willing to be influenced by ideas and opinions that are not our own.

And this is one place where Unitarian Universalists can run into trouble. We got to be the way we are because we were unwilling to be influenced by opinions and institutions with which we disagreed. We can identify ourselves as people who say "no", who cling to our status as outsiders, who cherish our hurts, who ask of each other to not hurt us further.

But if we are going to be a community of faith, we have to begin to heal those hurts together. We have to open our minds and hearts to each other. We need to accept that disagreement does not mean contempt, and we need to learn to disagree with each other without hostility or defensiveness. We need to be

kind to one another, especially when we feel hurt or angry. We need to be charitable to each other when we are trying to understand why someone said or did something that may have hurt us. The fundamental attribution error can lead us into a defensive judgmentalism that is as hurtful as anything we came here to escape.

We need to learn to listen to each other, to speak our minds, ask questions, and listen to the answers. That's how we can come to understand each other. It's a kind of scientific method. We don't just look at something and presume we understand it. Of course we form hypotheses, opinions about what people mean, but we can't presume their accuracy unless we test them, verify them. When someone says or does something you don't like, don't walk away and lick your wounds, ask them what they meant. You might learn something. And when someone asks you what you mean, don't presume that they're attacking you. They may be trying to understand you, to know you, to learn how to be an even better friend.

I believe that it is important that those who make up a community of faith take the time to truly listen to each other, and also to have the courage to speak the truth of their lives. This doesn't just apply to our Sunday morning services. If we're to be a vital, living community, we need to have the courage to say what we think – to take responsibility for our positions in public. So that others can ask us what we mean, so we can learn more about each others' secret chambers. And it's equally important that we open our minds and hearts to hear each other in a way that's not defensive.

It takes courage to speak. It also takes courage to listen. This is the kind of courage our community needs, and this is the example we need to set if we are going to show the way for our culture into the third millennium. Diversity need not mean estrangement. Diversity can lead to peace and harmony if we have the courage to share our differences with one another – with kindness, sympathy, charity, love and respect.