

Please Understand Me

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We all love to let our little lights shine, to radiate pure love like happy babies, but we don't always do it all the time. Even babies know this: sometimes they're happy and sometimes they're sad.

We can all remember what that's like. One moment we're happy and connected with our mother or father, and then, all of a sudden, that connection is broken. It may seem like they're angry with us, or maybe they're just distracted. We might not understand why, but that shining light is lost and we want it back. It feels bad, but in a secure relationship, we learn to trust that things will be good again.

Sooner or later, though, we encounter relationships that aren't so secure. Was there a time when you realized that your little light wasn't welcome? Something happened that made us feel vulnerable and fearful about letting our light shine. Somehow we lost our naïve faith that others would welcome what we had to offer.

I can remember how this happened the year I entered high school. My father had a new job and we moved to a new home in a new city. The whole family was excited about our future.

I had grown up in a neighborhood and school system where I felt safe and knew what to expect. My friends were the children of farmers, factory workers, salespersons, soldiers, and engineers. Some of us had less than others, but nobody was particularly well off, and there was no sense that anyone was different. We were all "just us." Any hostility tended to be temporary and a sense of community was the norm. Letting "This Little Light of Mine" shine made sense there. Sometimes I hid my light because I was sad or hurt but I always knew it would shine again and all would be well.

Then my father got his new job and we moved to a neighborhood where the houses were bigger. I was excited when we joined the country club because I

thought it meant that I could play more golf. I loved to play golf. My father taught me how to play and it was one of the main ways we spent quality time together. I can remember getting up at summer sunrise when the air was cool and the morning mist still kissing the meadows. We would grab our clubs and drive to the golf course while the air still smelled and tasted like the nectar of my dreams. It was one of our favorite activities, along with camping. But it turned out that his new job didn't leave him much time for golf.

But school was starting and I wanted to let my light shine. I'd had lots of friends before the move, so I expected to make a lot of new friends in the new school. I was as open and eager as a puppy. I thought people were all the same, but my new classmates found me foolish. They played jokes on me that I didn't understand, mocked me, and finally ignored me. I was hurt and dismayed. I never quite knew why, but it was painfully clear that they didn't want my light to shine and I learned to keep it to myself when they were around.

I found that I could let my light shine in another way – in music and drama. These activities brought me together with people who shared common interests and eventually led to nurturing friendships that made high school much more satisfying.

It's like the story of the ugly duckling. Living with a different species, the young bird can't understand why others mock and reject him. He tries to fit in but to no avail, and finally concludes that what they say is true: he is the ugliest duckling ever and is completely worthless. As he grows he seems to get uglier and uglier. Eventually the sad little bird leaves the nest and finally meets a family of swans who recognize him as one of their own and take him in, lavishing him with love and praise.

Beautiful swans make ugly ducks. If a kid from the country fails to fit in at the country club, that's just how people behave everywhere. Groups tend to accept those who are like themselves.

Despite the openness and joy of the song, people usually feel safest to let their lights shine with people they trust. So they look for people like themselves, ducks for ducks, swans for swans. But is that a reliable way to choose how to

share our light? We all know that there are some ducks that are kind to everybody, and some swans are cruel to each other.

But it's easy to use group categories to decide when and where to let our lights shine. We can become like other people by joining their group. Groups relieve us from the effort of understanding. They can make it easy to fit in. Group identity is useful but also unsatisfying because it's not based on people seeing each other as they really are.

The longing to be understood is a basic human need, as basic as the need for love. And we'll often do whatever it takes to be understood, even if it means accepting a simplified version of our own selves. When we accept a group identity, the group story becomes our story. In order to do this, though, we have to suppress our authentic selves. And suppressing our true selves can alienate us from our own best judgment; we can become foolish, and make decisions that leave us distrustful of love. Because love without reason can be naïve vulnerability. But reason without love can be cruel.

Love can be a name for one way in which we're all the same as each other. This is an ancient human and religious discovery, that there's a way in which we're all the same, despite our differences. The Hindus have a word for it, "namasté," which they use as a form of greeting. It means, "I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides, I honor the place in you of love, of light, of truth, of peace. I honor the place within you where if you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us."

It's a wonderful sentiment, a way of recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of each person. But notice the word "if" in there. "If you are in that place. . . ." They know that our unity, while fundamental, is partial. The realm of individuality and personality is one of difference. This is the part that takes work. It's easy to understand the pure shining light of love where we're all the same. But each one of us is also unique.

Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson recognized this in his essay on "Self Reliance." He said that, although divine love may be universal, each and every person has to follow her or his own path to reach and embody that love.

Love's naïve, childlike faith that everyone is just like us can make it hard to appreciate just how different other people really are. But we do know how much it hurts when we are misunderstood. Those kids in my high school who rejected me didn't know anything about me. They didn't really see me as a person. They just behaved according to their prejudices.

Henry David Thoreau expressed the need for tolerance of individual differences in this way, "If one does not keep pace with one's companions, perhaps it is because one hears a different drummer. Let each step to the music they hear, however measured or far away." David Keirse sums this up in his book, *Please Understand Me*. He says:

If you do not want what I want, please try not to tell me that my want is wrong.

Or if my beliefs are different from yours, at least pause before you set out to correct them.

Or if my emotion seems less or more intense than yours, given the same circumstances, try not to ask me to feel other than I do.

Or if I act, or fail to act, in the manner of your design for action, please let me be.

I do not, for the moment at least, ask you to understand me. That will come only when you are willing to give up trying to change me into a copy of you.

If you will allow me any of my own wants, or emotions, or beliefs, or actions, then you open yourself to the possibility that some day these ways of mine might not seem so wrong, and might finally appear as right – for me. To put up with me is the first step to understanding me.

Not that you embrace my ways as right for you, but that you are no longer irritated or disappointed with me for my seeming waywardness. And one day, perhaps, in trying to understand me, you might come to prize my differences, and, far from seeking to change me, might preserve and even cherish those differences.

I may be your spouse, your parent, your offspring, your friend, your colleague. But whatever our relation, this I know: You and I are fundamentally different and both of us have to march to our own drummer.

We are all fundamentally different from each other, and we are also fundamentally the same. We can't just be one or the other. We're both. It doesn't make sense to resent someone for being different; they couldn't be anything else!

This is where we can let our lights shine by putting our love to work. As I said before, love without reason can be naïve vulnerability. But love with reason is understanding. We can let our light shine through our reason to learn how others are different from us, what makes them unique. The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says that understanding IS love. When we really pay attention to someone, we open our minds and hearts to them, to really see and understand them. We let all of that person come to us, not just the parts that are like ourselves.

When pressed for simplicity, the Judeo-Christian tradition can express its core values, its deepest wisdom, in a simple formula that says, "Love God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength."

The Jewish reformer named Jesus of Nazareth refined this when he said that God is love. That makes things even clearer. We don't have to worry about who or what God is or what system of reward and punishment that might imply. We can simply replace the word "God" with "love." This gives us a statement that begins, "Love love with all your heart..." When we cancel out the repetition, it becomes clearer still: "Love with all your heart. Love with all your mind. Love with all your strength."

Isn't love what "This little light of mine" is all about? What do we get when we let the light of our love shine through our hearts? We get compassion, the ability to feel the emotions of another person. What do we get when we let the light of our love shine through our mind? We get understanding, the ability to truly know another. What do we get when we let the light of our love shine through our strength? We get integrity, the ability to live our values despite the

challenges of temptation and compromise. Or, in the words of one of my spiritual teachers, Dolly Parton, “Find out who you are and do it on purpose.”

Jesus also added, “And love your neighbor as yourself.” That means our compassion, understanding and integrity would be available to those who are not members of our own groups, who are not like us. Notice that this also assumes that we love ourselves, that we have compassion, understanding and integrity for ourselves, something that many of us find hard to do.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition is in a unique position to help us to understand each other and ourselves because it is a combination of the paths of reason and love.

Universalism is built on the belief that love is the ultimate truth. It was a response to the harsh doctrines of eternal punishment that dominated 18th century religion. Universalists found the God of the New Testament to be one of hope and compassion and believed that a just and loving God wouldn’t create humans only to sentence them to hell. They believed that all would be saved.

Unitarianism was built on a rejection of the idea that there was something inherently wrong with human nature, a flaw usually described as “original sin.” Unitarians believed that people made themselves better or worse as a result of their own choices. They believed that people could learn the difference between right and wrong through the application of reason and intellect and therefore make good choices.

These wonderful Universalist and Unitarian traditions were incomplete without each other. Universalists put their faith in God as a loving parent who made it safe for their lights to shine, but placed less emphasis on reason. Unitarians put so much faith in the human capacity for reason that they sometimes overlooked the importance of love.

But when we combined Unitarianism with Universalism through our merger in 1961, we created a faith that brings together the best of both traditions: reason and love. Unitarian Universalism is the way of compassion, understanding, and integrity.

Can you remember a time when you felt uneasy just because someone was different? When the sight of someone’s clothes or skin or hair made you feel

awkward enough to look away to make sure there wouldn't be any eye contact? Have you felt anxious about the prospect of having to talk with someone you weren't sure you could understand, or who might not understand you?

In a diverse society like ours, people need to find ways to let their lights shine that aren't based on rejecting outsiders. We need to embrace the love that makes us one, but honor the differences that make us unique individuals. We need the gifts that Unitarian Universalism has to offer.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are workshops for the development of compassion, understanding, and integrity. Our openness to religious, ethnic, class and gender diversity ensures that we will have plenty of opportunities to know people who are different from us. As we come together to affirm our ultimate values, as we experience the joy of understanding and being understood, we can learn to let our light shine ever more brightly.

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.