

Balancing Diversity and Unity
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There are two basic definitions of “diversity.” The first is simply the idea of there being a variety, differences, things not alike, etc. The second, fairly recent and more relevant to our focus today, is the definition (from Webster) that diversity is “the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races, or cultures or gender identities) in a group or organization.” It is a recognized good to promote diversity in our institutions, and as a nation we have come a long way from the time of desegregation of our schools. However I think you would agree that achieving diversity in our nation and in our world is still much more of a hope than an accomplishment. Even in our UU congregations we have room to grow in diversity inclusion.

In the natural world I find numerous examples of diverse ingredients that combine to form a unity. Atoms are composed of disparate particles to form unique elements. Elements combine to form compounds. A complex organism is composed of numerous diverse organs that function together. The biosphere of the earth is a dynamic unity of infinitely complex entities and processes that function together. You get the idea. Can human groups and societies learn from nature to combine the uniqueness of individuals, ethnic groups, races, religious, sexes, people of differing sexual orientations, etc. to form more unified and less contentious institutions? Can we overcome our egocentrism to become more integrated?

I want to make two basic points in this talk: First, to the extent that UU’s embrace a healthy balance between diversity and unity, we can serve as role models in a divided nation and world. We can offer a way forward. In the second half of this talk I hope to show that, in spite of our theological diversity, UU’s show some surprising unity of belief.

My sense is that diversity of belief, life-style, culture, religion, etc. is a good thing to the extent that it is in keeping with personal values and not harmful to one’s self or others. I think it is fine, for example, to believe that marriage means only uniting one man and one woman, but I don’t agree that one has the right to impose this belief on others. That crosses a line. In our country today differences in religion and values have resulted in profound divisions that politicians exploit for advantage. What we sorely lack are enough voices that speak to what is best for our nation as a whole rather than positions that pit one group against another and foment hatred and even murder. We need voices that promote respect for diversity and pluralism. Think of the man who killed the people at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado shortly after the airing of a falsified video that was explicitly created to foment dissention. The gimmick video was designed to put pressure on Congress to defund Planned Parenthood and the hope was to get the country behind this effort. Something is really wrong here. I don’t believe the

creators of the video intended for blood to be shed but people don't often see the long-range effect of dishonest and mean-spirited attacks such as that one. We must learn to appreciate our national diversity or we will continue to be a nation in conflict, one where hatred overtakes love. The same is true for our whole world. I need not say much about how religious fanaticism is undermining international peace. The main problem as I see it is the conviction that your group alone is in possession of the truth and the only correct way; all others must yield. Political commentator David Brooks pointed out recently how the failure to compromise could lead to dictatorship.

UU's are arguably the most diverse group of believers and non-believers of any organized religion ever in history. Among us are deists, theists, agnostics, atheists, Buddhists, Wiccans, pantheists, and many more. With all this diversity and individuality how do we come together in small congregations like ours or as a national religion? One way we do it is through a covenant such as our fellowship has "to respect and celebrate differences." I would like to think that UU could serve as an example of how a group with differences in belief, race, sexual orientation, and others can be in meaningful relationship. Bringing diverse people closer together, promoting dialogue and harmony, to me is a spiritual practice. This helps promote social justice. It is part of our heritage, principles, and identity as UUs. It also underlies a founding principle of our nation: *E Pluribus Unum*.

The late presidential candidate of the 1950's, Adlai Stevenson, a member of the Unitarian Church of Bloomington, Illinois, put it well in a quote that appeared in last summer's issue of the UU World:

I think that one of our most important tasks as Unitarians is to convince ourselves and 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 lifeless. Here lies the power of the liberal way — not in making the whole world Unitarian; but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination. Thus we can learn to grow together, to unite in our common search for the truth beneath a better and a happier world.

Thus even without a shared belief or doctrine we are united in this purpose. That is part of UU unity. To the extent that we can achieve harmony along side of diversity we can serve as a model for other institutions.

Recently the opinion was expressed that we overvalue individualism in our congregations and it is harming us. UU Rev. Fredrick Muir proposed that if we don't switch from what he terms "I-church" to "we-church" our movement would

die. As I interpret this, he is saying too much individuality, and perhaps even diversity, is harming our movement. He believes our focus on the individual comes at the expense of creating Beloved Community. Further, he blames the existence of the “I-church” on Emerson. “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature,” Emerson proclaimed. “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” (from the famous essay, *Self Reliance*). But community is very much present in Emerson’s writings, too. He speaks of “that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.” Perhaps it was Emerson’s vision of the unity of all life as represented by the “over-soul” which inspired his advocacy for the abolition of slavery, the equality of women and free, quality public education. Emerson was a champion of individuality and diversity, unity and inclusion. He saw no contradiction in this. While I agree with Rev. Muir that our UU tradition needs to become more open to strengthening community I don’t agree we need to “trash” Emerson in the process (as Rev. Jay Deacon put it). I believe our strength as a movement comes from embracing both individuality and diversity on the one hand, and unity on the other. In other words we need to balance diversity with unity in our congregations.

Is Hosea Ballou’s famous dictum that it is sufficient for Universalists (and Unitarians) merely to “agree in love” not enough (Rev. Michael Schuler)? Is something more required for “unity” than to respect one another’s integrity as free thinkers and to show compassion for them as fellow sufferers? I think not.

I recently came across a 1973 article from *Scientific American* I had clipped. It was about Judaism as it was being practiced in the 200 years before to 100 years after Jesus. It pointed out that there was a great deal more diversity in belief and practice among Jews then we have been led to believe. The pre-rabbinic tradition of the Pharisees suppressed the alternatives of that time, which included Hellenistic Judaism, animal sacrifice elsewhere besides the temple in Jerusalem, pagan worship, practices of magic and mysticism. Some of the early Gnostic writings are written in Hebrew, and it is debatable whether the Gnostics were identified as Christian, Jewish or something in between. The writer of the article argues there were only two forms of Judaism that survived the deliberate suppression by rabbis and Christian authorities, with the help of the Emperor Constantine: Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity. Is it not a shame to lose that diversity of expression in religious tradition, and what a positive message for our era to see the co-existence of diverse expressions of Judaism and Christianity in ancient Israel?

A few years ago Ronn Smith spoke about self-reliance vs. self-sacrifice. He proposed a symbiosis between individualism and altruism. He said, “they require each other but one could devour the other.” This outcome can be avoided by understanding our true self-interest. Ronn meant that it is in everyone’s self-

interest to embrace diversity. That is the way to achieve the symbiosis or balance he spoke of.

To the extent we seek to honor and promote diversity do we run the risk of limiting our unity of purpose. Without unity of belief what will hold us together as a community of faith?

You cannot be religious all by your lonesome. You can be spiritual but not religious.... True community doesn't happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group. If this doesn't happen, then we are merely a group of individuals sharing common space but not becoming a community." (Rev. Cheryl Walker)

One image of balance between diversity and unity is that of a patchwork quilt. One can appreciate the individual squares each with its unique design, but all sewn together.

A recent news broadcast I heard about an evangelical church in the south somewhere that illustrated a remarkable level unity in the midst of diversity. The church is 60% black and 40% white, and the minister is white. This church is an accepting and loving community in spite of the fact that all the black members vote Democratic and all the white congregants vote Republican. All members focus on the beliefs and values that they share in common and don't allow skin color or politics to divide them.

Some good news, as far as I am concerned, is that we UU's share far more in common theologically and ethically than I was aware. The Commission on Appraisal completed a report in 2005 called "Engaging our Theological Diversity. Theology is the study of the deep questions and beliefs on the subject of existence, including but not limited to the nature of God. Some common misconceptions about UU include that UUs can believe anything, and that there are no unifying beliefs at all among us. Not so on either point. One of the primary functions of a theology is to provide people with a framework for understanding our human place in the world. The central question of the report was that, in the midst of our theological diversity, is there a unity that we can articulate? What is it that holds our movement together? Being open to diversity of belief, life style, orientation, race (and so on) is a big part of what is attractive about UU. Can we as a movement, speak with one clear voice? If so, what is the message?

There is a difference between unity and uniformity. I quote from the report:

A community of people can be relatively uniform in practice and procedure, yet not be unified in purpose or vision. Unity rises above all accidental variations, and embraces all differences that are not in themselves incompatible with unity. (Think of that mixed race church.)

Uniformity merely makes people resemble one another; it is being and doing as parts of a whole that gives them unity.

The parts of a clock are not all the same but together they contribute to telling time. When speaking of uniformity the image that comes to my mind is a group of people dressed in identical uniforms. A musical chorus makes another handy analogy. If you have four sections of a chorus singing different melodies or in different keys, but all in harmony, that is “unity.” However, if all the voices in the chorus are singing the same melody that would merely be uniformity, and not nearly as interesting as the blending of the different sounds.

Here is some of the unity the Commission found. UUs quite commonly believe in the role of personal experience of the transcendent. That is what the first of our Six Sources says. We follow the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau in this regard. Generally we UU’s believe revelation is not confined to biblical times but is happening right now and it behooves us to be open to it. Another important commonality is that UU’s believe in the role of reason in shaping our beliefs. Our Fourth Principle implies this. Emerson, Channing and other important UU figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also articulated it. Most UUs believe that science and faith are not enemies but alternative ways to arrive at truth. In the 2004 survey of UU’s, 90% said they agreed that their beliefs were founded in personal experience shaped by reason. That is remarkable unity for us. This says most of us arrive at our personal truths in a very similar way. UU’s are also united in our acceptance of the Principles and Sources. While the Principles do not represent a creed, there are underlying spiritual beliefs within them. For example our seventh principle implores respect for the “interdependent web of life.” If we reflect on this principle we can only feel a sense of awe, wonder and connectedness. It says life is relationship and there is a grand, and perhaps sacred, underlying unity, however we choose to name or acknowledge it. It was suggested by the UU Commission on Appraisal that the seventh principle most clearly represents our shared belief about the relationship between people and the world.

The creation story in Genesis places man (sic) at the pinnacle of the world. Adam was told to “subdue the earth” and he was given “dominion,” as the Bible puts it. The world, the animals and vegetation were created for human benefit alone in the Bible story. A more liberal interpretation of this chapter is that humans are to be custodians and stewards of the world’s resources. However, both the original and the more liberal interpretations were clearly human centered or anthropocentric. Such views have been challenged by scientific discoveries including the fact that the sun does not revolve around the earth, that orderly laws control the functions of nature, and most particularly the discoveries of Charles Darwin. We know now that humans are merely a part of “creation” and not at the center. When Darwin published his work both Unitarian and Universalist ministers supported it. The legacies of scientific rationalism, as well as the Enlightenment, have led to the realization that humans are a part of “the

interconnected web” but not at the center. Many UU’s find expression of this view in Eastern and Native American religions, which also promote the idea that humans are part of but not at the center of the natural world. Again a whopping 90% of respondents to the survey, both ministers and lay UU’s, stated the Seventh Principle was “highly important” to their faith. Many have tied the Seventh Principle to religious naturalism. “Religious naturalism is an approach to experiencing and appreciating nature with the awe, reverence, and respect that are usually associated with religion, but without the metaphysical paraphernalia of the latter.” In fact it was the rise of religious naturalism that led to the adoption of our Seventh Principle. One survey respondent put it this way: “The experience of the presence of life within me, within the present moment, within all people and creatures, the intuition that we share this life and are intimately interconnected in a fragile and durable world of love.” With regard to the Principles as a whole, 70% of UU’s stated they were valuable guides. In terms of the “Sources” between 50-60% of UU’s rated the first source and the fifth source most important in guiding their spirituality. The Fifth UU Source refers to “Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

By wide margins, we UU’s also tend to have shared beliefs about sin and evil. Generally we don’t believe in the Christian concept of original sin. We believe in the human potential to be inherently good and to do good deeds. We also don’t believe in salvation through faith but rather our positive actions. We embrace “standing on the side of love,” working for social justice to improve the world and our own sense of well-being. This idea is closer to Buddhism than Christianity. We tend also to be hopeful to the degree we can change the world for the better. The vast majority in the survey did not believe in Armageddon or the coming of the Messiah. We believe that the “salvation” of the world is in our own human hands, and we see this as our responsibility. Many UUs support the Paris climate change agreement, as an example. President Morales led the large Climate March in NYC two years ago.

90% of survey respondents gave the following affirmation a rating of high importance: “The depth dimension of our lives (spirituality) calls us to live mindfully, seek meaning and serve love.” 86% of lay people and 90% of clergy stated they valued both reason and spirituality.

So amid our well known diversity we have considerable unity. The Commission on Appraisal summarized its findings as follows:

Ours is a faith founded in history and ideas. We are an ecological faith and a profoundly human faith. We are a responsible faith in that we seek to eliminate suffering and improve the world. We are an experiential faith open to the transcendent. We are a free faith inviting each member to build his or her own theology. We are a relational, covenantal faith in that we are held together by commitments to one another rather than by

shared creed or dogma. We are a curious and open faith in that we don't claim to own the truth but we continue to deepen our understanding and love. We are a reasonable faith in that we bring our rational minds to our worship. We challenge assumptions and idolatries. Finally we are a hopeful faith; we are justice seeking. We would create a space for the realization of possibility whether we call it the "commonwealth of God" or the "Beloved Community."

My hope as a UU is that we continue to work for unity of purpose without sacrificing diversity among our membership. May we continue to support one another in this journey.