

## “Growing Our Diversity”

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The question I want to talk about today is this:  
Here in our own congregation, are we as diverse as we want to be?  
And, if not, what, if anything, are we called to do about it?

*Diversity* is one of those words that pushes a lot of buttons for us. It carries a lot of connotations with a lot of emotional weight. Literally, what diversity means is simply difference, or variety. Obviously no two people are alike, though some people are more alike than others. Wherever two or more people come together, they're going to be different in some ways and alike in some ways—diversity as well as similarity. That's just a fact.

But when we talk about diversity in our culture and in our church, we're talking about very particular *kinds* of diversity that have everything to do with our national history—the way that some groups have held a lot of social power and others have been shut out and oppressed, based on their race, their ethnicity, their class, their gender, their sexual orientation, their abilities, or any of the myriad ways we human beings put up divisions between ourselves in our bizarre and tragic misconception that somehow it's OK to grab more for ourselves at the expense of our neighbor.

The life of faith, in every tradition  
and certainly in our own liberal faith tradition,  
is about breaking down that myth  
that some people have the right

to oppress and mistreat other people.

Going deeper still, the life of faith is about breaking down the illusion that we are separate in the first place.

We are all connected, all part of the human family,  
the family of life itself.

We who appear to be so separate,  
in our separate bodies and separate skins,  
we are one. We are all connected, all part of a much larger whole,  
a unity, a truth. But this mysterious thing we are all a part of—  
this great truth—is so vast,  
only a very few great human souls have ever seen it fully.  
Most of us can only hope for glimpses, flashes of insight,  
intuitions that are but dimly understood.

The apostle Paul put it so well—we see in part, we know in part.  
Each of us can see a small piece of the truth—  
the *big* truth with a capital T.

And more and more our congregations and our nation are waking up  
to the reality that who we are shapes the truth we can see.

Our race matters; our social class matters—our gender, our age,  
all those things about us that make up this soup called *diversity*.

Our liberal religious tradition has an important part to play  
in this national conversation, because we've taught for many years  
that none of us has the whole picture.

The tradition we inherited from our earliest religious ancestors  
in this country tells us that truth can speak from anywhere  
in the circle of the gathered community,  
and the greater the diversity of voices in that circle,  
the wider our vision of the truth.

The African-American Unitarian Universalist minister  
Mark Morrison-Reed, the author of our second reading today,  
reminds us that

“alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen,

and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.  
Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”<sup>1</sup>

If you’re asking yourself, *why* should our church be diverse?  
I think *that* is exactly why.

We need diversity because without it,  
our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen.

And we *long* for a wider vision of truth.

We long for diversity because the truth we long for  
is a story about the connections between every person  
and every being, a story about the love which is possible between us  
and which even now can be realized when open minds and hearts  
meet freely in a spirit of respect and compassion.

So let me ask again: Are we as diverse as we want to be—  
as we long to be, as we *need* to be  
to fully realize the transformative potential of our church  
and our movement?

In some ways, I think the answer is *yes*:

Diversity of gender and sexual orientation is here,  
thanks to the struggles and the faith of our congregation  
in past years.

It’s just not an issue. Been there, done that, *doing* that. It’s good.

Another thing: more and more, we are a congregation of all ages.  
Where else in our society can people who aren’t related to each  
other—babies and young kids and older kids  
and young adults and middle-aged people and older people—  
where else can all of us enjoy hanging out together?

There is a lot of diversity here,  
and a lot of wisdom and energy that comes out of that.

But now we are coming to the real deal,  
the elephant in the sanctuary—

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<sup>1</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*, #580.

the thing we know we really need to talk about:

*race* and *class* and *culture*.

Because here's where we hurt,

as a congregation and as a movement.

This is where we feel our challenge is,

this is where we feel like we're maybe not doing so great.

Can I just name the stereotype here?

There is a story prevalent in Unitarian Universalism right now that says, we are a bunch of mostly middle-class white congregations, and we *wish* we were more diverse racially and culturally, but we haven't been able to attract more than a very few people of color despite our awesome message of universal love and justice.

I'm not saying that is *the* reality, *the* truth,

but it is a story among us.

And those who feel that story is true

are carrying a whole lot of sorrow and frustration and shame around issues of race in our movement.

I often hear pain in the voices of white Unitarian Universalists as they ask, "Why aren't we more diverse?"

Why don't more people of color want to come to our church?

What is so wrong with us?"

The questions take on a special poignancy

in our own city of Stockton,

one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in the country, if not the world.

Let me tell you what *I* think. I don't have all the answers,

but this is what I think and believe and hope about diversity and our faith.

I think we have to start with the core of who we are as a people following a particular religious path.

We are a people who have inherited a faith

that the ultimate source of all things is love.  
We have come to believe that each one of us, every person,  
is part of that source, joined with bonds that can never be broken.  
We put our faith in that source and feel it speaking within us,  
a voice of divine wisdom within each one of us.  
We recognize that voice speaks truth  
when it prompts us to live lives of more love and more justice.  
We seek to allow our lives to be shaped by its promptings.  
We are a people who delight in the many and varied manifestations  
of that divine wisdom in many times, many places, many peoples,  
including our own.

This is what I think is the core of our faith.  
This is our sacred story, our holy path.  
We will freely share it with anyone who wants to walk with us.  
We do know that ours is one of many religious paths in this world.  
We love to study other religions, and the cultures they come from,  
and learn from them.  
But we as Unitarian Universalists make a very common mistake  
when we assume that, just because we love world religions,  
we ourselves do not have a culture that might be a barrier to anyone.  
We tend to forget that our story, our religious way,  
has emerged out of a particular cultural experience .  
Like *every* faith, it is deeply shaped by culture.  
Our faith is not universally appealing  
because it comes out of an experience which is not universal.

Let me tell you just a little bit about what I mean.  
A while back I read an essay on class and Unitarian Universalism  
by one of the teachers who has had a huge impact on my ministry.  
David Bumbaugh is a professor at my seminary,  
Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago.<sup>2</sup>  
David talks about his experience

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<sup>2</sup> David Bumbaugh, "Beyond the Seven Principles: The Core of Our Faith," *Journal of Liberal Religion*, available online at [http://www.meadville.edu/LL\\_JournalLR\\_v5n1\\_Bubaugh.htm](http://www.meadville.edu/LL_JournalLR_v5n1_Bubaugh.htm).

growing up very poor in a Salvation Army church.  
That church, he says, served people who were poor, on the margins,  
people who did not have much hope  
that society would ever treat them with fairness or concern.  
That church preached a message of hope for *those people*—  
a message that there was a world beyond this one  
where all the sadness and pain and struggle of this world  
would be made right, where faithfulness would be rewarded.  
This was a gospel of endurance, not social transformation.  
Because that was the message those people needed to hear  
to make it through their lives with a sense of hope.

This early experience gave David a perspective on our tradition  
that we really need to hear.

Now, as a Unitarian Universalist, David points out  
that our message of hope, *our* good news, is very different  
because the deep soul-needs of our people have been different.  
He believes, and I think he's right,  
that Unitarian Universalism in the United States  
is deeply rooted in the experience of the middle class.

The story of the middle class in the United States  
is fundamentally a story about leaving the place you come from  
in search of something better.

Middle-class people have put their faith in education  
to give them knowledge and skills they can use anywhere.  
Very often they have left the communities that raised them.  
They feel they have different values from their parents.  
Often they carry guilt over their choice to leave and be different.  
They hunger for a community of like-minded people  
who can validate the choices they have made.  
And they are haunted by the fear of failure,  
forever insecure, afraid of disaster, driven to find ways to feel safe.

This is the middle-class experience—these are the deep soul-issues

that have shaped very distinct ways of being religious,  
including our own.  
So many of the metaphors and images and stories  
that speak to us draw on that middle-class experience.  
We speak of faith as a journey—  
a journey of transformation,  
a quest for truth,  
a never-ending journey of learning and self-improvement.  
These are our sacred images.

And because most of us do have some measure of social power,  
we speak of the power of our gathered community  
to change the world,  
to right wrongs *today*, not in some future world.  
This is our sacred mission.

There is so much more to say about class and race  
and our movement,  
but for now this is what I really want you to understand:  
Our story has its origins in a particular cultural experience.  
*And* that does not make our story any less sacred.  
When we study world religions,  
we learn very quickly that there is no religion outside of culture.  
Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity didn't evolve in a  
vacuum—they evolved in a particular time and place,  
and they've changed and evolved as they have moved  
to different places and different peoples with different cultures  
and life experiences.  
So I think the same is true for our faith.  
Our sacred story *is* sacred *and* it has come out of  
a predominantly middle-class cultural experience,  
and a predominantly white experience.  
That doesn't make it less sacred or less worthy.  
But it does mean that our faith may change  
in ways we cannot even imagine

as we continue to welcome people from all kinds of backgrounds.

What I think we are called to *do* about that is this:

Let us tell *our* sacred story as beautifully and compellingly as we can.

Let us share our good news, our message of hope with the world.

And then let us make sure that anyone who recognizes our story as their own finds a welcome here.

I don't think we are called to change or compromise the core of our sacred story for the sole purpose of attracting a population that is more racially and culturally diverse.

But we also need to be ready for things to change as our congregation *becomes* more diverse.

I'm thinking about when I first moved in with my husband.

We were both pretty set in our ways,

but there were habits we both had to change

so that our relationship could flourish—

nonessential stuff like, what time is dinner?

Or, which way do you hang the toilet paper?

Little stuff that affects you every day—you definitely notice it but it's not the core of who you are.

What we *didn't* do is try to change each other's core values or ethical beliefs. Some change *happened* as our relationship deepened and we learned from one another, but it wasn't forced.

Church is the same way.

Some things we've found we need to change,

other things we may still find we need to change

so that a more diverse community can flourish

without giving up the core of our sacred story—

the kind of music we sing, who writes the readings we use in worship;

how we run our meetings, maybe.

We always need to be asking ourselves,

where can we be flexible and stretch ourselves and grow?

Next year, by the way, we're planning to offer

an adult religious education program on multiculturalism to help us figure out what that might look like.

This shift is already happening, of course, and *has* been happening for a long time. There are *already* people of color in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, most of which were historically all-white but are no longer. There are *already* people of every class in our congregations.

We see this just by looking around our own sanctuary—this is *already* our reality. We are already a diverse community and becoming more so every day.

Meanwhile, all of us here all are who we are.

We have the knowledge and the experience we have.

And those of us who come from non-middle class

or non-white cultural backgrounds

are going to have pieces of truth

that those of us who come from middle-class white culture don't necessarily have.

We need *everyone* to keep learning and growing in the truth.

And it *is* a learning process.

So let me ask you one thing:

If you have what I call an “ouch” moment in our church—

if something happens around race or ethnicity or class,

or anything really, that you feel hurt by—

because we all make mistakes out of ignorance;

that is just reality—I hope you will not keep silent.

I really ask that you come and talk to me about it.

And I hope we can all talk about it as a community.

This is an ongoing thing here that will not be finished ever, really,

as long as our circle leaves *anyone* out, however unintentionally.

This is a process, so let's be open to the truth each of us brings.

Let us work together to make sure our congregation

is as welcoming as we can be,  
so that *everyone* who claims our sacred story as their own  
can find a home here.

That's the way of our faith.

That is how we all grow together in community  
and justice and love.

So may it be.

Amen.