

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Strong Identity Supports Diversity”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 5, 2017

Sermon

My original idea for this service was to look at denominations that are more racially diverse than we are and see if there are ways they organize themselves, behave and serve others that Unitarian Universalists could copy and use to support the growth of our diversity. One of those ways I've been thinking might be effective is developing a stronger sense of identity.

A couple of years ago, the Pew Research Center did a study of the most diverse denominations. The two Christian ones that were way more diverse than the others were the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses. As I read up on these denominations, I found they did indeed have very strong senses of identity. But little if any of that strong sense of identity had parallels with or translated to Unitarian Universalism. One key factor that prevents parallels and translations of how they do church is our strong resistance to hierarchical authority. I realized I wasn't going to be able to make much of an argument for a strong identity supporting diversity in Unitarian Universalist congregations using these churches as examples ... but thankfully there is more to the story.

Identity statements have been difficult for Unitarian Universalists for a long time. Unitarians and Universalists have been struggling to come up with statements of belief since the early 1800's. Each time they did, someone or some group would feel left out. So we'd draw the circle a little wider. The first statements rejected the Trinity and miracles. Then they disagreed about the nature and importance of Jesus to our identity. Then it was the nature and importance of God. Finally, at merger of our denominations in 1961 we stopped worrying about beliefs all together and focused on shared values that bind us together. And even those caused umbrage at the time and may still for some older members here today who didn't fully embrace the Purposes and Principles when they were finalized over thirty years ago. Our focus on individual belief and practice has made it difficult to define ourselves in the ways most religious organizations do. They can easily say, "This is what we believe." Here, each of us is free to answer that question as individuals. It's much harder if not impossible for us to answer that question for our entire congregation. Actually the belief question isn't even the right question to ask to define us.

Here is my latest refinement of my 100 word UU identity speech when I get asked about our congregations and movement:

Unitarian Universalism is an American religious tradition derived from the faith of the Pilgrims that today is based on shared values rather than shared beliefs. We recognize that people who arrive at our doors already have deeply held beliefs and un-beliefs that are written in their hearts. We encourage people of all ages to discover, grow, and develop those beliefs and find resonant connections with our shared values. Here, our guiding purpose is

to seek and develop coherence between our values, beliefs, and actions in the world, in our congregation, and in our personal lives, for the benefit of life itself.

The last sentence is the crucial one. Working on discovering, growing and developing our own beliefs through learning, engagement with teachers, conversation and spiritual practices can happen in many other places than here. The challenge of seeking and developing coherence between our values, beliefs and actions is the work of a lifetime. It is work that benefits greatly from an ongoing relationship with a religious community. And if you don't fit well into another religious community, as most of us don't for a myriad of reasons, we are an excellent choice for people who want to follow their own hearts and minds rather than being directed to follow the beliefs and practices of others.

Unfortunately, just knowing our congregation's values, our freedom from religious dogma and our approach to the discovery, growth and development of our own beliefs, doesn't tell you whether this is going to be the right religious community for you to put down roots. I know people regularly check us out on the web, visit uaa.org, read a few sermons, then show up for a Sunday service. Some, after just one or two visits, decide we aren't quite right for them. My worry is they might get turned off by something that happens or doesn't happen that doesn't represent who we really are as a congregation. They may not get enough experience of us to really know who we are as a community and walk away too soon. I especially worry about this when it comes to encountering the less than robust diversity in our congregation.

And when I say diversity, I'm not just talking about people who have more melanin in their skin than the average here. I'm also talking about people who are in their teens, twenties and thirties. I'm also talking about atheists and Humanists as well as Unitarian and Universalist Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. And I'm also talking about people without college degrees, conservatives, Republicans, Trump supporters, recent immigrants, and people with limited economic means – even those who are homeless and destitute. If we want to be serious about the first line of our mission statement, “We welcome everyone,” we have to consider if there are barriers related to a lack of diversity here that turn people away who embrace our values and our way of growth and development in the context of religious community.

A major problem for those of us who've been here for twenty, thirty or forty years is they may not recognize some of those barriers. They have a circle of friends here and already feel welcomed and embraced in their participation. They are in the center of the community and have forgotten what it felt like to enter this congregation. Or when they did come for the first time, it was an easy entry. They looked around and saw people just like them. They may have seen a few co-workers or friends from other contexts. If they had been part of another UU congregation, much of what they saw, heard and felt was very familiar. Or if they grew up Protestant or Catholic or Reform Jew, they felt an ease with the Sunday service, the music and the language used. That may not be the experience, for example, for many people of African descent who come here for the first time.

To taste this experience of disorientation, I encourage those who haven't done so to attend a Missionary Baptist Church like our neighbor on the west end of our block. This is a denomination that is 99% African American. Many melanin challenged people are disoriented and uncomfortable attending such a service. There are unfamiliar with the liturgy and the songs. The message may be difficult to hear, understand and appreciate if you are not a Protestant Christian. Now imagine a regular attender from that church deciding to give us a try and how disorienting that person's experience might be in our congregation.

To our credit, we do strive to offer hospitality to visitors. The Congregational Greeting part of our service allows that friendly welcome to happen at a direct personal level. The Welcome Desk in the lobby says to the visitor, this is not a closed community. We have a wall of brochures people can take home to learn about what we offer and how we do things here. And there are lots of very friendly people in our congregation who are happy to go up to visitors and make them feel welcome. Every Sunday we strive to put our best foot forward to welcome everyone.

Most visitors I speak with feel we do this well as a congregation. Where we could do much more however is in helping people understand the somewhat amorphous process of religious community. It is probably the most important part of our congregational life that needs much more visibility to help both our visitors and our members appreciate its significance and the benefits it provides.

This is where developing a stronger sense of identity might be very helpful.

Making our sense of religious community more understandable and relatable might show people the path to move from the outside to the inside of our congregational life. Having watched numerous people make this transition from visitor to dedicated and involved member of our congregation, I would like to make far more explicit to visitors how that happens. Unfortunately that movement has built in challenges that can turn people away.

An illustration of this barrier comes from an excellent [1993 speech](#) by Cherie Brown, then Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute which does diversity training and helps organizations overcome barriers to inclusion. She created her own definition of diversity following a program she led in Birmingham, Alabama. The program was being held at the 16th Street Baptist Church where four children lost their lives in 1963. She had been invited to Birmingham because the community leaders wanted to try to heal the scars of racism in that city. She had just about every religious leader in the city there in the church that day. Listen to her words:

At one point in the session a woman put up her hand. She was a white woman who taught at the University of Birmingham. She said "Cherie, please help. I feel like the Black students I teach let me into the living room, but not into the kitchen." I never forgot that statement. A living room, after all, is often a formal place. It's the place where we are polite and entertain visitors. The kitchen is where we are with family, where we feed one another - sometimes where we yell at each other, but where we always return. And how many of us have people of different races, religions, ages, class backgrounds, sexual orientations, living with us in our kitchens? And to me, that's what working on diversity is about - increasing the kinds of people that are with us in our kitchens.

This is a beautiful metaphor of what we seek to do as we invite people inside our congregation. Emerson and Channing Hall are our living room. Connections start to happen when we invite each other into our homes and when we meet in small groups. We actually do invite visitors to our kitchens as I did for a circle dinner last month or to our kitchen here to support our reception after the service or for a memorial service. Sharing a potluck dinner is a time honored tradition of breaking bread together at common tables.

It goes deeper than food though. It is **how** we talk and listen to each other here that matter. The great gift of our way of creating religious community is to offer a friendly non-judgmental ear. When we share deeply in small groups or one-to-one conversations about our faith, beliefs, doubts, struggles and questions, the process of discovery, growth and development is engaged. This is the work an inspiring sermon can't do. Since I don't tell people how or what to believe, much of what I do is to stimulate that process which will go in different directions for each person. Often that inner exploration happens best in conversation with someone whom we feel we can trust.

And that can be a big challenge for visitors here to overcome. It takes time to develop those relationships of trust to have those open explorative conversations. The Meaning Matters program is designed to encourage the development of that kind of trust. Sometimes it happens working on

common projects or preparing for a social justice action or processing the results of that action. Teaching a religious education class with others is another opportunity for deeper exploration in relationship with fellow teachers and students. Sometimes that trust can be developed in one of the many social gatherings that happen here.

One way that has been used for hundreds of years in our congregations to invite people into our kitchens and build trust is a compact called a covenant. Congregational covenants can be a way to make a public commitment about how we treat each other and what we can expect when we relate to each other. Covenants are ways to make conversations safer and more conducive to developing trust. You'll hear much more about covenants each Sunday this month.

There are many Unitarian Universalists who are deeply nourished and fulfilled by our way of doing religion. It isn't an approach that only works for middle-aged free-thinking liberal humanists descended from Northern Europeans. Clearly it isn't an approach for everyone, but there are many more people out there who would respond to our approach than participate in our congregations. Some may be here checking us out this morning for that matter.

I urge us to consider different ways, including a congregational covenant, to develop a stronger identity. If we do, then let it be in the service of supporting a greater diversity of people held together in a greater sense of common values, shared purpose and deeper mutual trust.

While the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses aren't the great examples of how to do this, the science of evolution can come to our aid. Next week I'll be talking about religious organizations as successful examples of the evolutionary process of group selection. And in group selection, we'll find validation for strong identity and boundaries that support group survival, growth and development.

Whether we feel like we're in the living room or the kitchen here, may we find the courage to awaken our senses to a deeper level that invites the power of love to teach us the reality and the possibilities of religious community that can happen here for all of us.