

## “Practicing Pluralism”

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The closing line of our Unitarian Universalist statement of Principles and Purposes says, “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.” This has always been a compelling statement for me because it has served as a reminder to celebrate the many diverse theological perspectives that are embodied in our congregations. And there was a time that I simply used “diversity” and “pluralism” interchangeably.

And then I was introduced to the work of Diana Eck professor at Harvard and one of the most notable advocates for religious pluralism and inter-religious understanding in the U.S. who delivered a major lecture at the 2005 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. She says:

“Pluralism is not an ideology, not a new universal theology, and not a free-form theological relativism. Rather, pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our deepest differences. For some that engagement will be in the religious or theological register, and for others it will be in the civic register. For many if not most of us, it will be both. Pluralism is not just another word for diversity, but it is engagement with that diversity. It does not displace or eliminate deep religious commitments, It is, rather, the encounter of commitments, in both the religious and the civic sphere. Pluralism does not mean abandoning differences, but holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world as it is today, it is a language that we all need to learn.

We Unitarian Universalists advertise ourselves as congregations that promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, who govern ourselves by the democratic process. We claim a living tradition that draws from traditions including direct experience of mystery and wonder, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings and the spiritual teachings of world religions and earth centered traditions. The UUA has promoted in recent years a number of initiatives such as Welcoming Congregation which encourages sexual orientation diversity and the Journey Toward Wholeness aimed at, among other things, deepened understandings of race as a diversity issue. This is a mere thumbneil sketch of the range of political, personal and theological positions that one might find among our membership. Given all this diversity that we encourage and welcome, it would seem that Unitarian Universalist congregations would be a hot bed of pluralistic dialogue.

By this I mean that we engage as Eck says in “dialogue as a practice that enriches both self and other. Dialogue is essential to the building of community and "a world that works for everyone," to use a phrase of Buckminster Fuller. Dialogue involves

mutual truth seeking. One seeks to explain one's own culture and faith and to deepen one's own self-understanding while also listening with openness and a spirit of sympathy to the other. The goal is not total agreement. The goal is mutual understanding and the building of a real relationship with the other. “

My observation is that it seems that we are a good deal better at tolerating differences than we are about sharing and engaging and exploring them. This is challenging because pluralistic dialogue is not really part of our dominant culture and so requires of us time and discipline and intention.

The women in the Faith Club committed themselves to such a dialogue.

Suzanne, the Christian member of the group described in this morning's reading, her own process of putting herself squarely into dialogue with her own faith and the faith of her Muslim friend when she invited her to attend Easter services in her Episcopal Church. There were at least two profound aspects to that encounter. One was the interactions which caused the Muslim woman to accept the invitation and her own subsequent reflections on her Muslim faith. The second was the encounter that the Christian woman had with her faith as a result of viewing it critically through the eyes of a Muslim.

Diana Ecks, speaking on a global level provides direction for what we might consider at a congregational level:

“pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.”

Unitarian Universalist Congregations have come into being as a result of our claims of reason and acceptance of diversity. The special identity of our movement in significant in part depends upon how we honor and grow from the sharing of our differences. This is hard and challenging stuff.

The dominant history of the world, past and present, is the story of how hard it is to do that. Religious and political battles, from the crusades to the seemingly eternal struggle in the Middle East, to political elections in the United States, to the partisan gridlock in our congress are all characterized by the human instinct for fight or flight. Be it nurture or nature, human beings do not seem to be naturally inclined to pluralistic dialogue which involves the process of seeking depth, learning from that depth and arriving at, if not agreement, at least a place of mutual understanding.

Engage with me for a few minutes in an exercise that may illustrate my point.. Close your eyes and think of a small gathering that includes you and a some others from this

congregation – coffee after a Sunday service, perhaps or a circle supper, a newly formed chalice group or adult education class. Choose people to whom you feel attracted or about whom you have some interest or curiosity. I am going to say a list of words. Think about your own reaction and the reaction of the others in your group to a statement that would **imply**, as new information, that one of you **may** be one or more of the following. Pay attention to your own reaction

...theist...homosexual ...athiest...anti abortion... supportive of the Iraq war... homophobic... Opposed to Barack Obama because he is black ... Christian...homeless... republican... childless by choice. Do you think that there is a community standard in this congregation regarding these terms? If any of these terms applies to you, under what conditions might you choose to share that? What, if anything might cause you to withhold that sharing? Would such a disclosure move you closer to what you understand to be the community standard or further away from it? Would such a disclosure encourage or discourage further disclosure? Under what conditions might you feel proud and safe to assert this aspect of your identity?

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I certainly have my own ideas about what the community standards are in most Unitarian Universalist congregations. We operate out of a set of assumptions about what are the characteristics of most Unitarian Universalists. They are the standards that seem to exist as part of common parlance. When in doubt most of us are generally politically correct in an effort to appear both inoffensive and non-confrontational. This has the effect of creating what appears to be and often is in fact, a safe context in which people feel they will be accepted and respected wherever they are in their spiritual, emotional, political journey. This can be a good thing.

The downside is that this culture of kindness and safety can create a paradox. We are a faith tradition that welcomes all kinds of theological, political, economic, affectional, racial, educational differences so long as we don't know too much about it. Not talking about our differences can create the illusion of similarity **and** a lack of depth. We can come to assume that others think, feel, believe as we do. When we are aware that the assumption of similarity is being made, we sometimes withhold our differences as a way of honoring the community standard or avoiding what we fear as confrontation.

We react to a good deal more than we say, either because we don't care enough, don't want to rock the boat or simply do not feel comfortable enough going against the cultural norm. In so doing we can sacrifice depth. Though this may be inclusive it can become a culture that actually discourages pluralistic dialogue, even when it may be appropriate or desirable.

I raise this because I believe that there is a good deal of richness that we might be missing by settling for mere tolerance of diversity. I believe that we have the possibility of

challenging ourselves to a deeper level of understanding by engaging each other as the pluralists we claim to be. Steven Rockefeller in an address to the graduates of Meadville Lombard Theological School our UU seminary in Chicago:

“A pluralist is committed to the art of dialogue as a practice that enriches both self and other. Dialogue involves mutual truth seeking. One seeks to explain one’s own culture and faith and to deepen one’s own self-understanding while also listening with openness and a spirit of sympathy to the other. The goal is not total agreement. The goal is mutual understanding and building real relationship with the other.”

This concept has huge implications at all levels of engagement. Rockefeller and Eck frame their remarks at a global, regional level. I contend that all theories succeed or fail at the interpersonal level and that the practice of pluralism must begin in our families and in our communities of faith. Unitarian Universalist congregations are ideal laboratories for this kind of communication.

So let’s go back for a moment to our imagined encounters of a few minutes ago and consider how we might engage one another as pluralists. Suppose that you define yourself as a democrat. Suppose that in your group of three or four someone discloses that she voted for John Mc Cain in the recent primary election.

Think about your knee jerk reaction or that inner conversation that at best precedes the public response, “What, are you nuts? Why, if Mc Cain is elected president etc.etc.” Or imagine that you are a humanist and find out that someone in the group is a Christian who especially appreciated the numerous references in the service to “God”. You might or might not say aloud, “If I had known how many references there would be to God in this service I would probably have stayed in the car.” Now, if you have been listening, you probably can identify that these responses are probably not entrees into a pluralistic dialogue.

What might it be like, then, to say in the first instance, with authentic intention, “I have been a Democrat my whole life and would really like to know what motivates you to vote for Mc Cain. Could you tell me more about that? Or in the second case “I am interested in what about the use of God in our Sunday services is particularly meaningful to you. I consider myself to be humanist and find the God talk to be especially awkward. This probably part of a larger conversation. Could we get together for coffee sometime and talk about it?”

I am sure that there are some of you who do this. I do, however, feel it is safe to say in a culture built on sound bites and competition and where ambiguity and lack of absolute certainty is seen as weakness, this has become a counterintuitive process. It is also hard and challenging, like many worthwhile things are.

In Duluth Minnesota where I spent the first 21 years of my ministry, a small but growing number of “liberal congregations” join together to offer an annual conference called Opening our Doors which is an opportunity for individuals and congregations to affirm

the place of Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Trans-gendered persons in communities of faith. Each year the publicity for the conference is sent to all of the congregations in the area around Duluth without regard to denomination or perceived theological position on homosexuality.

Three years ago in the early weeks after the conference, I received a letter from the Pastor of a evangelical covenant church inviting me into dialogue about the issue of homosexuality. He had received the conference brochure and was unable to attend but he was interested in engaging his ecumenical colleagues, not, he said in debate, but in a real conversation about the nature and morality of homosexuality.

I decided that it was time for me to step outside of my comfortable Unitarian Universalist liberal religious ghetto and test my assumptions about the position of the religious right and also to challenge my own capacity to practice “justice, equity and compassion” in human relations; to engage in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” To engage myself in a full on pluralistic dialogue.

And so we met for a total of about ten hours – five two hour sessions – and talked. During the first session we shared our stories of how we had decided to become ministers and something of our personal background, and we laid some ground rules. We agreed to not see this as a conversion exercise on either part. The goal was to deepen our understanding of each other’s position. We agreed that our challenges to each other would be to establish clarity and to test for internal consistency – to test each other’s thinking rather than to question each other’s faith. At base, his faith was in the inerrancy of the Bible; mine in the potential for human goodness and responsibility.

His task, it turns out, was easier. Though he was undeniably an intelligent and reasonable and deeply caring man, his greatest asset was his knowledge of the Old and New Testament which he used liberally to reinforce point after point after point using thousands of years of history and law. I, on the other hand, was left with only the stories of the real people I had known who had struggled to legitimate the expression of their love within the context of responsible and committed relationship, and my personal conviction that we will ultimately be saved by what unites us – and the greatest of that is love.

At the end of each session we would pose a question for each other. One week we looked at the passage in Leviticus that outlines sexual abominations in the law of God along side my criteria for acceptable sexual expression as that occurring between consenting adults within the context of a loving and responsible relationship. At the end of our time he asked me to consider the idea of incest between adult siblings of similar age and status. Would that be acceptable according to my criteria? This was, of course, something that he would never need to consider. The Bible says, NO. I, on the other hand, had to think about it and consider if it met my criteria and if it did, was it okay? I SO did not want to go there. I, after all, have three children very close in age, who at least LIKE each other as well as some couples I know who also sleep together. I knew that to preserve both my integrity and my credibility I would need to play that scenario out in my mind. What if as

say, adults in their forties, two of them were unpartnered and infertile and decided to buy a house together? And after a time fell in love and became a couple. How would I feel about THAT? I could hardly breathe as the scenario unfolded in my mind. My discomfort was immense.

What I decided was that, regardless of discomfort, it was still all about love. I was being challenged to ask myself if there was a limit to my belief in the power of love in all its complexity and mystery. Could I have an opinion about the social complications of their relationship? Of course. Could I be concerned about the healthiness of their motives? Could I wish they would make a different choice? I could. Would I continue to love and support them. Definitely. Would it make me change my criteria for acceptable sexual expression and come to rely upon some moral absolute embedded in ancient tradition? I think not. Am I grateful for the opportunity to look deeply and searingly at my beliefs? Absolutely.

And that is what I said to my Christian colleague. He listened respectfully. He did not challenge me further. It was clearly not about reaching agreement. We were engaging one another in pluralistic dialogue. Our perspectives were as mutually exclusive as could be and yet something more important than agreement or conversion was happening. We were building mutual respect in the face of difference. We were looking as carefully and critically at our own beliefs as we were at each others. We ended our time together with a sense that neither of us would be willing to paint each other's traditions with the broad brush of dubious integrity. The threat to each other still lay at the point that civil law be created or invoked to force one of our perspectives to prevail. But in the meantime we do better talking to each other than about each other.

I freely acknowledge, here, that nothing is as smooth and elegant in reality as it is in summary. This was the hardest conversation I have ever had – not only because it was a difficult topic but because of how hard I had to concentrate to quell my defensiveness, to avoid leading and baiting, to stay present to what he was saying and suspend my judgments and projections. This practice is not for the feint of heart . But I think it is practice without which we never do more than skim the surface and in so doing limit ourselves to easy answers to complex questions.

We are now in an election year. I think a lot these days about the glaring absence of pluralistic dialogue both inside and outside of our beloved community. How seductive it is to be drawn into the repetitive exchange of foregone conclusions.

Steven Rockefeller says:

“May we learn to trust that in the midst of all our diversity and disagreements, we are part of one human family and one Earth community, that we are beings born for relationship, that we can grow as persons and find fulfillment only in and through creative communication and cooperation, even when we are deeply divided in our interests and goals. A pluralist believes that a wise person is open to learn from everyone, including our enemies.”

I am certain that there are significant examples of pluralistic practice going on in this congregation. Adult Education and spiritual development opportunities such as Building Your Own Theology serve to deepen our understanding of our unique and interconnected journeys. Engaging in such social justice efforts as Journey Toward Wholeness and the Welcoming Congregation encourage participants to look at their preconceived notions about race and sexual orientation. The Chalice Group program creates a safe space and a structure to hold deep conversation.

In a dominant culture that deals in sound bites, minute management, impulse buying, fast food and quick fixes of every kind, the practice of pluralistic dialogue is fundamentally impractical. It takes time and commitment and leadership to create a culture that supports spiritual, political and intellectual depth. But the diversity that we as Unitarian Universalists invite holds within it this tremendous potential to make our congregational communities laboratories for the very best and deepest and most loving kind of human discourse.

May it be so.

