

## **BUF Sermon: August 2, 2015**

### **All My Relations: Diversity in a Multicultural World**

By Jeff Packer

Good Morning and Welcome! It feels a bit like preaching to the choir to talk about right relationship to diverse others in a Unitarian context. We are diverse... here, or at least we strive to be. We honor human dignity and worth. We don't require any particular beliefs or practices. We aspire to acceptance of differences and inclusion in our communities. It's OK to disagree... at least most of the time. But it would be a mistake to say that establishing healthy relationship to diverse others is easy... in the larger human world for sure, but also within our own community sometimes.

Of course the challenge of human diversity is nothing new – whether it's cultural diversity, religious diversity, or just someone with a different opinion than our own. If we look at the colonization of indigenous cultures, or the struggles for civil or LGBT rights, we see that so often human diversity or “otherness” is perceived as a threat. Why is that? It seems to me that right relationship to diverse others is a key issue in the struggle for social justice. It's also a key issue as we move more and more into a globalized world community. I find it interesting that diversity - a sign of health in the natural world – in communities of life – in ecosystems.... is such a challenge in the human world. I mean, the health of a forest is directly related to the natural diversity preserved in that forest. Why would it be any different for us? Each individual, each culture, each tradition having something precious and unique to offer the whole... no matter how different from me, or my way. It takes some humility and open-mindedness.

When I was in High School, my school in Massachusetts had an exchange program with a school in Germany. I remember the German girls attending school my senior year. The exchange happened to be with an all-girl German school, but I assure you, this had nothing to do with my interest in going on the exchange to Germany that summer. At first, I didn't think I would be able to go. I wasn't in any foreign language courses or cultural programs at school – my grades weren't even that good. I spoke

with the German teacher at school who was hosting the trip. I was surprised when she told me that they were considering canceling the trip. Not enough people were signing up or interested in going. Not only was she happy to have me sign up... but they ended up having to offer the trip to many other schools in surrounding towns to get the minimum number of people to make it happen. I was excited! Six weeks in Germany!!! Staying with a host family. We took boat trips on the Rhine River, went wine tasting, dancing, toured medieval castles, attended parties and school events, took day trips and went to 2 different beer festivals.

I remember telling friends that I was planning to go. I was surprised by some of the reactions. One friend said to me: "Why do you want to go over there?... they don't have anything over there that we don't have here." Really!?!?! Are you kidding me?? The experience was so rich and so fun! And yet, this ethnocentric, or perhaps American-centric, attitude was common among many of my peers. The underlying assumption was that our culture is better than theirs. They really don't have anything of value to offer us. I think this was one of my first blatant encounters with this kind of superior/inferior, us/them dualism that characterizes so much human interaction. I now think it's related to our human ego, which defines itself, and often derives a sense of identity from, maintaining rigid boundaries between "me and others" or "us and them." Add a little story of judgement and suddenly we're not just different but "better than."

If you think about it... one of the things that characterizes the challenge of human diversity is a fear of "otherness." I think it was in the 1960's classic book: *The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment*, that I read that we are capable of expanding in Love or contracting in fear. It seems true... fear is an energy of contraction – a pulling back or inward. Of putting up defenses or boundaries against perceived threats. A kind of survival instinct. Fear is self-protective – very important when faced with a cougar or some real threat. But many fears are also imagined, irrational, even associated with some inaccurate story we or others are telling us. Worry, anxiety, paranoia... there are many mental health disorders rooted in acute forms of irrational fear and the results are always the same. Fear divides, separates, isolates. It excludes. Sounds a little like our political climate today.

Love, on the other hand, is an energy of expansion. It includes. When we open to the energy of Love, the rigid boundaries between things begin to dissolve. Love unites, builds connection. Even our sense of self expands to include others. Love moves us in the direction of a consciousness of our unity or oneness.

I love the story of the astronauts who went up into space for the first time and looked back at the earth. It reminds me of what Sallie McFague writes about in one of her books about what she calls “wild space.” Wild space refers to stepping out of what she called the “bubble of conventionality” - in order to get a whole different perspective. The idea is when we step out of the familiar, a whole new range of possibility opens up. For the astronauts they literally stepped out of the bubble of earth’s atmosphere. They saw a huge blue, green and white living ball floating in space without boundaries lines, without labels or names. Just One Thing - containing us all - inspiring a sense of awe and beauty difficult to describe. It is such a reminder to me that... Yes, our human distinctions, diversity, differences are to be acknowledged, even celebrated. And the ways in which we categorize, label, and define life and existence are helpful in many ways. But on another level, that’s all relative truth. In a deeper sense, or from a more holistic perspective, the rigid boundaries between things are illusory. Nothing really exists in isolation and here we get into the realm of not only the mystical, but what the science of quantum physics is finding as well – everything exists in relationship to everything else.

At school last winter, I attended an interfaith conversation entitled *Hope in Troubled Times*. One of the speakers, a Christian minister, Rev. Jennifer Wilson, mentioned two things she feels is crucial in addressing the challenges we face today. 1) A realistic understanding of the human condition. 2) A willingness to embrace mystery. In terms of the human condition, we live in a more and more global society. The world is becoming smaller. I would even say we are becoming more diverse, not less. Take the Christian tradition for example. When someone says they’re Christian, what does that really mean today? There are over 300 Christian denominations. Unitarians being one offshoot of that tradition. Christians today range from the more traditional, orthodox religious narratives, rooted in the magic/mythic lens with highly

specific beliefs – what some call “revealed religion”... to a growing view of human spiritual development - an evolution of human consciousness from self-centeredness towards Love or Unity consciousness. Interestingly, “Old” religion seems to be fading while the new evolutionary views of spirituality are gaining ground. The latter does not negate reason or science and it articulates a more holistic and global perspective in understanding the human condition. It seems to me, that the growing challenge of creating global community in an increasingly diverse world requires that we embrace a radical inclusivity and a broader understanding not only between religious traditions, but between scientific and spiritual understanding as well. The idea that “my” way... or “our” way in terms of national, cultural, religious or even scientific views is the “right” way or the “better” way for others makes less and less sense. Movement must be towards integration of diverse perspectives.

Secondly, Rev. Wilson spoke of the willingness to embrace mystery. What does that mean? I think it refers to our attitude, posture... our openness (or lack of openness) to what is unknown to us. Do we approach unknown others with skepticism, fear, a need for certainty or to be “right?” Or do we approach them with a healthy sense of curiosity and openness? I love the bumper sticker: “Minds are like parachutes, they only function when open.” But, I recently realized that having an open mind might be perceived as a negative thing to some – like being naïve, gullible, having no opinion or your own, etc. Yes, have an open mind, but not so open that you’re brains fall out. It doesn’t mean erasing all prior knowledge or experience. It doesn’t mean not having an opinion. But, it does mean being interested in learning how others see and experience the world – whether we agree with them or not? Are we quick to judge others, or what they mean by words like “Christian” “God” or “Faith?” Are we relating to others as they are, or are we relating to our own story we are telling ourselves about others? - - - We always hold the power within us to decide whether to change our mind or not - so it’s not that important whether I agree with them or they agree with me. The perspective of others doesn’t have to be perceived as a threat. Much human defensiveness and reactivity is completely unnecessary. We are sometimes so quick to disagree and defend our position that we don’t listen very well. Much more important than agreement is a sense

of safety in sharing and dialoguing with one another - creating a space which acknowledges rather than tries to conquer our differences.

Eckhart Tolle once gave a great example of differing perspectives at a talk I attended. He stated that one could make the case that the United States is the best country in the world. They could give all kinds of convincing reasons and examples why. It would be a compelling case containing much truth. Someone else could make the case that the United States is the worse country in the world. Their case and examples would be just as compelling and also contain much truth. Who is right? Or, like the end of the film *Life of Pi*... which story do you prefer? Different perspectives, viewpoints... the larger reality or Truth is often, if not always, greater than any one viewpoint. Please, don't hear me as saying: "Don't have a viewpoint!" I think it's enough to recognize that all viewpoints, including our own, tend to be limited.

Religions sometimes fall into this same trap of making exclusive truth claims. You are probably all aware of the metaphor of God as an elephant and we are like flies on the elephant. One fly on the ear says: "God is like a leathery flap that flops back and forth." Another is on the tail and says: "God is a rope that swings to and fro." And another is on the leg and says: "God is like the solid trunk of a tree." You can see where this is going... Then they create conflict over whose definition is right or perhaps conclude that there is no elephant... Much of the history of religions has been dominated by this kind of dualistic debate. In our quest for certainty, we lose sight of the unknowability and the mystery of what we could call God.

In May, when Crystal shared her reflections on her own growing understanding of theology. She came to a conclusion which I really appreciated. She said something like: "God is not a being, but a state of being in right relationship to all that is." This idea of right relationship to the larger reality we inhabit is a common and key theme almost all Wisdom, Spiritual and Religious traditions that I am aware of. Biblical language expresses it in terms of aligning oneself with the "will of God." – living in some kind of accord with the laws of life, love, justice. Indigenous cultures speak of it as a "way of Life" - of living in harmony and balance with "all my relations," the earth, and the Great Spirit. Right relationship to Creation and Creator. The contemplative or mystical

elements of many traditions speak to this same human potential – which today is being described as a movement or evolution from the dualism of rigid either/or thinking, to a growing awareness or consciousness of our inherent unity or oneness. Not Unity vs Diversity, but Unity in Diversity - – a celebration of the unique contributions and gifts of difference.

So really Jeff, what does this mean for all of us? I just heard one of you thinking that! Like the title of the song some of you shared from the service at GA in Portland... it requires us to Draw the Circle Wide in compassion, love and inclusion. Healthy communities seem to respect and hold diversity in a particular way – whether in a congregation, a denomination, a religious tradition, or any organization or system of life. Can a growing sense of global community contain, hold, and honor the unique gifts of our individual communities? This is part of the challenge of living in a multi-cultural, inter-religious/inter-spiritual world. It is a growing challenge for religious traditions today. I believe it requires us to open our minds and hearts even more to those different from us. To work together on common goals. To stretch the realm of our knowing and our comfort zones. To deepen our capacity to be present and attentive to others. To embrace mystery. To practice curiosity in how others see and experience the world. To participate in the practice of interfaith and interreligious dialogue. To build bridges of understanding between science and religion, between faith and reason, between the material and the spiritual dimensions of life and understanding... And, as Thomas Berry put it, we are called to understand the human in terms of the evolving universal story – the story of a planet, of Life, and of our place in it.

I end with a quote from Evelyn Underhill who in the early 1900's defined mysticism as: "The Art of Union with Reality." She writes:

*When we look out towards this love that moves the stars and stirs in the child's heart and claims our total allegiance, and remember that this alone is Reality and we are only real so far as we conform to its demands, we see our human situation from a fresh angle; and we perceive that it is both more humble and dependent, and more splendid, than we had dreamed. We are surrounded and penetrated by great spiritual forces of which we hardly know anything. Yet the*

*outward events of our life cannot be understood, except in their relation to that unseen and intensely living world, the Infinite Charity which penetrates and supports us, the God whom we resist and yet for whom we thirst; who is ever at work, transforming the self-centred desire of the natural creature into the wide spreading, outpouring love of the citizen of Heaven.*

Final Reading: The Sacred Hoop – from Black Elk Speaks:

*Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, And round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.*

*And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell, And I understood more than I saw. For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit.*

*And the shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight,*

*And in the center grew one mighty flowering tree, To shelter the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was Holy.*