



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

What Does Diversity Really Mean? Sermon by Rev. Darrel L. Richey June 15, 2008

What does diversity really mean? For many of us, it's having a community where we do not all look alike, so it's partly based on visual clues. It might also mean that we have a rich variance in ages – children, youth, young adults, adults of all ages. Again, this can be seen as well as experienced. Diversity might also mean that the community has members from very different backgrounds. This is often one of the most difficult to know because it is not seen on the surface so much as the differences are experienced through the course of time.

As we move forward into a new era here at James Reeb, I'm sure that diversity will be part of our conversations and our aspirations. But the reality is that **diversity should not be a goal**. To put it more strongly, I propose that to make diversity a goal is self-serving and more about ego. Even "righteous indignation" – anger directed at injustice – which some people call "righteous anger" is still anger and almost always directed toward others.

A better approach would be Sacred Aspiration. "Aspiration" means "a strong desire for advancement and honor." It's an inward exploration that may lead to outward expression. Partner this with the word "sacred" – that which is holy or most important – and Sacred Aspiration becomes a vehicle for personal transformation that can begin to transform society.

The crusades in the Middle Ages were a series of wars driven by righteous indignation. Countless Jews, Roma and Muslims were slaughtered in a craze to "take back Jerusalem." Ethic cleansings are acts of righteous indignation. And I believe that the fervor behind organizations such as the KKK and neo-Nazi groups operate from a sense of righteous indignation as well.

Sacred Aspiration, on the other hand, sees injustice and asks, "How am I a part of this?" and "How can I change my behaviors and attitudes?" It means to take on the injustice from the positive rather than the negative. Answering the negative with another negative only succeeds in strengthening the negative. In contrast, countering the negative with a positive leads toward balance. Balance. It is not a coincidence that the symbol for justice is a set of scales.

Just what does all this have to do with diversity? It's an invitation to look at the drive for diversity and ask if our priorities are in order. Does our work emanate from a place of righteous indignation or sacred aspiration?

The first step is to examine the basic drive for diversity. As I said, I think the drive in and of itself for diversity is self-serving and ego-driven. It's going after the badge of honor to claim that we are a diverse group; aren't we special? It's putting the cart before the horse or trying to cure measles by putting on make-up to hide the red spots!

Bruce Bush, a member of a cousin liberal religious tradition of ours said this about focusing on diversity for diversity's sake:

Diversity is a red herring. The search for it is not ultimately freeing but condescending and patronizing [and] seeks to impose our own progressive values on what should be a free society....What does it matter whether there are actually many 'diverse' individuals among us?

That is hard to hear and may sound wrong at first, but Bush is not saying that diversity isn't important, rather that it should be the result of other efforts and not the goal itself. Here is a quote from the UUA's Commission on Appraisal report, *Belonging: the Meaning of Membership*:

We would avoid some pitfalls if, instead of talking about growth and membership and outreach, we talk about creating sanctuary. If we work as hard – or harder – at creating safe and worshipful places as we do at creating diverse congregations, we will most likely find that, paradoxically, transforming awareness of the congregation will result in changing demographics.

The report continues, “as one African-American UU put it: ‘If you do [anti-racism work] and you don't attract persons of color, you're probably not really doing the work. Any effort to transform our movement will succeed or fail on the local level.’” And I would say that the work begins with doing internal work within ourselves first.

A better goal may be to become truly welcoming and embrace radical hospitality. Both of these efforts with even a minimal degree of success will naturally lead to diversity. But it's much harder to engage in this work than it is to attack all the “isms” on the outside as a way of showing how diverse and justice-seeking we are.

Becoming truly welcoming means to do the hard work of identifying our own biases as a community and seek ways to address them. It means to look at our own internalized “isms” with a willingness to experience personal transformation. This is harder, yes, but we will be more successful than when we seek to “fix things out there” because we have much greater control over our own actions than those of others.

Practicing radical hospitality means to actively open up oneself or one's community to more and more people and ideas that are different than our own. From another UUA Commission on Appraisal report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, comes this statement:

“A prophetic challenge is to be welcoming of ‘the other’ – the idea, belief or person who is a stranger to us – even when, or especially when, we do not wish to do so.”

The report goes on, “We will be powerful in expressing our unity within our congregations when individuals can embrace the person whose expression and practice of faith differs from theirs. Are we ready for the challenge?”

The really difficult part is to take that challenge beyond the context of theology and into the context of the whole person. Are we ready to embrace those whose life choices are very different than our

own, whose sexuality is quite different, whose biological assignment differs from their mental and spiritual self or those whose choices around loving and family are very different than our own? Skin color and theological differences are only a small part of the concept of radical hospitality and becoming truly welcoming.

I cringe at times, even here at Reeb when I hear a derogative comment about Christianity in general, when the person making the comment really means only certain radical Christian groups. I flinch when I hear that we can welcome some who choose polyamory, a family choice that allows for more than one partner, but then question if someone living such a choice is “right for leadership.” We cannot hold up one standard for visitors, another for membership and still another one for leadership.

The bottom line should be quite simple: Do those who gather here find themselves in sympathy with our purposes and principles and seek to support this community with their gifts of time, talent and a yearly financial gift? If so, then it is our job as a community to offer opportunities for personal exploration and transformation around sexuality, countering oppression and encouraging the becoming of the Beloved Community.

And I say that our main work here should begin with us, as sacred aspiration and then by becoming **living examples** we will take that work into our interconnected communities.

I'd like to share a few quotes I found on diversity:

Francis David, an early radical “Unitarian” (or anti-Trinitarian) from the 1500's who was imprisoned by testimony from his own colleagues and died in Transylvania, literally in a hole in the ground, said, “You need not think alike to love alike.”

Margaret Fuller a Unitarian Transcendentalist from the 1800's said, “Harmony exist in difference no less than in likeness.”

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian in the 1900's wrote, “Where diversity is suppressed, blasphemy and distortion ensue.”

How prophetic for the times we are in today.

The greatest aspiration to spiritual enlightenment is not in exploring what happens when we die, nor whether or not there is a heaven and hell, or reincarnation, or cycles of re-birth. No, though all of those might be interesting parts of a spiritual journey, I still believe that the primary goal of spiritual enlightenment is two-fold: to move ever closer to our authentic selves and to realize our connection to others and the universe.

Exploring our own biases around race, sexuality, theology, etc. is one of our greatest ways to move towards our most authentic selves. Racially embracing those whose ideas and life choices differ from our own is one of the best ways to deeply appreciate the interconnected web of existence.

May this be a house of sanctuary, a safe place to come and explore. A place that encourages scrutiny and honors differences rather than insisting on blind conformity. It will be difficult at times. At some point, if we're really doing the work, we will come upon a situation that challenges

our notions about what is “right” and “wrong.” Those moments will be fruitful if we dare to put our work into exploring our own reactions to the people or ideas that seem right or wrong rather than casting judgments against others.

May we move from righteous indignation into Sacred Aspiration in the positive living out of our purposes and principles.