

The Comfort in “Like-Mindedness:” The Challenge in Diversity
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Louise Green, the director of the Murray Grove Camp and Conference Center, which sits on the spot where the English Universalist John Murray landed in America, used to tell a story about her teenage son and religion. This took place long before the merger of our two movements as the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961 when Unitarians and Universalists were separate denominations with separate identities. She was an exceedingly proud Universalist! In fact, for some time after merger, the sign at Murray Grove announced the “Universalist Unitarian Camp and Conference Center” – “Universalist” preceded “Unitarian.” Whenever the subject of religion would come up as Louise’s son started dating a new girl, he got tired of explaining Universalism to the befuddled date. He finally fell upon saying, “I’m something like a Unitarian.” Once, starting the conversation about each other’s religion, he said to his new date, “I’m something like a Unitarian.” To which she replied in good humor, “Well, I’m something like a Unitarian, too, I’m a Universalist.” (I don’t remember if that was the girl he married, but it would make a good ending to the story.)

How wonderful it feels when we don’t have to explain our self. We don’t have to justify what we think or value. The other person just gets us. We’re no longer “something like;” we just are, and the other knows exactly what we mean.

The vast majority of Americans tell Gallup pollsters that they do believe in God 94% in a 2005 poll. Of the 5% who “feel that God does not exist,” only 1% are sure. (Note that the 61% of those who seldom or never go to church still believe that God exists!)¹ Can you imagine what it’s like to be an atheist in America? Can you imagine how refreshing it is to find other atheists and agnostics where you don’t have to explain or justify your lack of belief. You’re respected and accepted and cherished without having to pretend to believe something you don’t. How precious that is!

I remember the first time that I refused to take communion with my family. It was an Easter Sunday in Ft. Meade, Florida. As each pew was ushered to the altar to receive communion, I stayed in my seat; the rest of the row squeezing by me knees. I felt like I stood out, like all eyes were scowling in disapproval. But I held my ground unwilling to pretend any longer to beliefs that I had long ago discarded.

How liberating it was to encounter Unitarian Universalism where doubts were not discouraged as a sign of sin, but encouraged as a path to the more authentic! Atheists are welcome here. As the quip goes, “A UU may have no invisible means of support.”²

But – and it’s a big “but” – atheists are welcome here only if they are willing to engage with others who experience life differently. The proud legacy of Unitarian Universalism is freedom of conscience. It’s our 5th principle. We affirm that each person’s conscience will lead them to know what is true for her or himself. And that will vary, depending on a person’s experiences and reflection. Nobody can force another to believe something he or she doesn’t believe. We affirm that in Frances David’s famous

¹ <http://www.saviorquest.com/news2/pollgod.htm>

² *A Unitarian-Universalist Joke Book*, edited by Hinrich Bohn, Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, Tucson, Arizona, 8.

words, “We do not have to think alike to love alike.” In our more prosaic Fellowship mission statement we say we pledge to respect the varied religious paths that each finds meaningful.

That’s a tall order! There’s a too-human tendency to take comfort in like-mindedness. We want to be around people who think just like we do. We don’t want to worry about explaining, defending, justifying ourselves. We want to be loved for who we are; we don’t want to pretend to be someone else. And we think that the only people who will love us are folks who think the same things we do.

One way we get around the challenge of diversity is to not ask questions. There’s a kind of peacefulness in not asking too many questions. It’s the civility that many families strive for by keeping certain subjects off limits. As long as no one raises the controversial subjects, the family can pretend that they share deep affection. How many of you suffered through a boring Thanksgiving meal not able to share the deep joy you that makes you want to dance, or the profound sadness that wracks your soul, because your presidential candidate won (or lost) the election?

I fear that the same principle operates here some of the time in this Fellowship. Not wanting to risk offense, and fearing that the conflict will rage out of control, we avoid the deep questions about religious and spiritual experience. But the result is a kind of niceness that protects civility, but doesn’t satisfy the deep longing to express oneself, to explore and to learn about the most precious and important issues of our soul – ultimately to know and to be known at the deepest level.

There’s a tendency to sanitize the language, trying to avoid any offensive connotation. We call ourselves a “fellowship,” which has warm and wonderful feelings for those of us who know the place, but communicates nothing about our being religious to those on the outside. We find words in our “program” to name actions. Instead of “benediction,” we have “closing words.” Instead of “offering,” we have “sharing.” We call this space the “Main Hall.” (God forbid that worship should take place here!)

There’s an old joke about a woman visiting a “dignified” church. As the minister preached she got carried away and shouted “Glory, hallelujah!” At which point a gloved usher rushed to the woman, and whispered, “Ma’am is everything all right?”

“All right,” she replied, “I’ve got religion.”

“Not here,” said the usher aghast.

I’m pondering if all this energy spent on words is really a distraction from the deeper issues of diversity. It’s all a way of protecting the comfort of those who want to pretend that we’re all family here, much like those families that just don’t talk about the things that really matter in the lives of the people gathered around the table.

It’s a kind of peace, for sure, but it’s not very real. I invite us to explore the idea that beloved community may be based on a different kind of peace – what I’d call “deep peace.” Deep peace in ourselves gives us a foundation from which we don’t need the group to think like us. Instead we are curious about what moves and shapes another, even when – especially when – that person has a very different way of framing reality.

Buddhists talk of living in the “brahma-viharas” loosely translated as the “heavenly abodes.” (I would call them “a peaceful mind-state.”) When we learn to free ourselves of those mind-states that hurt us, greed, hostility and ignorance, we naturally live in this fruitful place in our mind/heart. Buddhists list four of these: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. For this sermon, I’d like to focus on the

third of the four brahma-viharas, sympathetic joy. “Sympathetic joy” means finding joy in another’s joy.

How often do we do that? How often do we feel envious when we witness another’s happiness?

What’s the difference? I’ve noticed that when I am satisfied myself, I can be happy in another’s happiness. But when I am dissatisfied myself, I’m less able to feel happy. Instead I feel jealous, or critical – “What did they do to deserve that? - that I didn’t do!” When I am at peace with myself, I am much more likely to feel joy in another’s happiness.

I think the same thing is true spiritually in our worship together. When I am at peace in my spirit, I am much more inclined to enjoy another’s spirit, even when they may express themselves in ways that are foreign to me.

When a part of the service makes you uncomfortable – some language used, some ritual – where does your mind/heart go? Do you notice the blissful expression that others experience as that same part of the service touches something deep inside them? Do you get so caught up in your own discomfort that you don’t even notice the folks around you who are fed by that aspect of the service? When a part of the service doesn’t reach you, do you think of yourself giving a gift to another? I’m willing to be slightly uncomfortable in order that another can be really joyful? And I can take joy in their joy? Do you become resentful? Why are “they” doing that to “me”?

There are several qualities of deep peace.

Deep peace isn’t fearful. At a deep level, I am confident that I will be loved and cared for, not matter what the other person gets. Life, community is not a zero-sum game where the other person’s needs met means they win and I lose. If they get their needs met, then my needs will not be met. Instead, it’s an organic growth game where the more the other person meets their needs, the more my needs get met. Together we spiral toward the sun, leafing and flowering each of us.

Deep peace is humble. It doesn’t insist on “my way or the highway.” It holds its understanding tentatively. “This is my best understanding as of right now, but I can be persuaded by new experiences. You can change me; and I you.”

Deep peace is not bland; it’s juicy. It’s engaged. It’s curious. Shallow peace wants to avoid any friction. “Don’t stir up the waters” is its motto. But deep peace is willing to challenge - but without arrogance. Its motto is “engage, encounter, transform!”

Deep peace is about something larger than me. I value the attitude of dialogue that encourages people to state their opinions not as fixed, and not with personal ownership, but as offerings into the center of the circle. Opinions come through us, but they are not “ours.” They are the best perspective that we have, given our histories, our experiences, our insights. But they are, if you will, on “loan” to us to use for a time until we have a greater understanding. Life is lived through us; it is not ours to hoard. It’s ours to use for as long as it’s useful, and to discard when it becomes useless.

Deep peace is confident, humble, juicy, and transcendent – to highlight a few of its qualities.

How does one develop deep peace? The paths are many. For some, developing a relationship with God leads to deepening peace. As they find themselves trusting in God more, they grow in their ability to love as God loves, unconditionally, universally, holistically. Yet others find a path through the goddess and the cycles of the natural

seasons. They find deep peace in the perspective of the fullness and abundance and complex variety of the natural world. Yet others find deep peace in the teachings of world religious teachers. Some find it in persistent analysis of their own experiences in meditation, guided by the insights of the Buddha or another teacher. Some find it in self-examination and reflection leading to humanistic wisdom that transcends egoistic desire. We are such varied creatures, with such varied histories, that we find different paths that call us in our diversity.

However, one nurtures one's own deep peace, I pray for us that we truly live the challenge in our mission - our pledge to “respect the varied religious paths that each finds meaningful.” I pray that an outsider, a visitor, to our community will remark, “UUFH is an amazing place! Each person thinks for her or himself. They are not like-minded, but unique minded. Each person has their own way of expressing what they find true spiritually, which they express with vigor. And yet they care for one another. How they love one another, even though they have very different ways of worshipping, expressing their joy and gratitude to that which is most sacred in their different understandings.” May we be such a community!