

The Diversity Which Unites us

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Christine C. Robinson

At All Souls Unitarian Church, via Zoom on March 4, 2022

Story: The Blind Men and The Elephant

That was an unusual telling of that old story: It ended with the Blind men all getting another chance to discover that elephant by moving around and experiencing all of its parts....very affirming for blind folks who can make good use of all their senses!

Most story tellers end the story by having the blind men learn about the whole elephant by talking respectfully to each other, hoping that they could meld their individual impressions of the elephant, which were limited, into a greater wisdom.

And that is a lot like a UU church! None of us can see or understand the whole of, well, even the physical properties of our universe, though we may have very strong beliefs, experiences, and opinions about parts of it. When we ask questions like, "What is the best thing to do, or What happens after we died, nobody can see the whole picture. So, we talk together, discuss ideas together, share our impressions and experiences and the things that really matter to us, with the idea that perhaps, all of us have a little bit of the Truth, and we are better, together.

It is sometimes uncomfortable to notice that not everyone thinks like you do. In this church we notice that discomfort, but we don't let it stop us from our exploring, learning, and growing in love and spirit.

Here is something to do when we are uncomfortable because someone is different from us. This is a part of a meditation technique that comes

to us from the Buddhist tradition, called loving kindness meditation. We are going to do it for our meditation this morning. Buddhists know that extending loving kindness to someone you are having difficulty with is an advanced practice, so this meditation starts with a couple of easier tasks: extending loving kindness to ourselves, and then to someone we love, and THEN to someone with whom we are having difficulties. So, before we start, I would like you to think of someone in your life with whom you are having some difficulties...and most difficulties are because one way or another, you are seeing things differently. The more strongly you think you are on the right side of things, the better for this meditation. Now, I want you to think of someone you love.

So settle yourself, take a couple of good breaths. Closing your eyes helps you to focus. I will talk you through this guided meditation. You can just silently repeat these thoughts after me.

We start, holding our own self in our mind, and saying to ourself: “May I live in the heart. May I be free from suffering. May I be healed, may I be whole, may I be at peace.

Now, picture your loved one in your mind’s eye. May I live in the heart. May I be free from suffering. May I be healed, may I be whole, may I be at peace.

Now picture the person you are having difficulty with. May I live in the heart. May I be free from suffering. May I be healed, may I be whole, may I be at peace.

Now: may we May I live in the heart. May I be free from suffering. May I be healed, may I be whole, may I be at peace.

In this peaceful place, we move into the sharing of the joys and sorrows of our lives.

Remembering all that has been shared, and what has remained in our hearts, remembering those who suffer and struggle around our world, and those whose lives have been interrupted by violence and war, we say:

May we all live in the heart. May we be free from suffering. May we be healed, may we whole, may we be at peace. Amen.

Reading, By [Gary Kowalski](#)

We thank you God for potlucks
Where a multitude can cook
With ingredients and spices
That aren't from just one book.

From casseroles and dumplings,
Hors d'oeuvres and canapés,
Puddings, sauces, pastas,
To sensational flambés.

How boring when there's just one dish
Or flavor to fit all.
How yummy and much more delish
When our feast's a free-for-all.

Our faith is like a banquet too,
With many forms of seasoning

Where Christians, Rastafarians and Jews
All do their separate reasoning.

But all can share one table,
Break bread and sit to eat,
Enriched by our diversity
From pumpernickel to whole wheat.

So we are our own blessing;
Our gratitude's made real
When we as friends can feed and serve
Each other in life's meal.

The Diversity Which Unites Us

(Jo will introduce, no title slide)

I have more than a touch of dyslexia. Sometimes I don't read what's on the page and my spelling was the bane of every teacher I ever had. I bought a computer I couldn't afford, exactly 2 weeks after I first heard the term "Spell Checker"...that was almost 40 years ago now. All these years of computer use has actually made my spelling much better but every once in a while my blindness to the exact way letters look still hangs me up. It did last week. I spent a lot of time searching old files for a sermon I knew I'd written once, about the diversity that unites us, but I couldn't find it...or any other times I had used that phrase. It's really a very important concept in a free faith. Since we don't enforce uniformity of belief, leaving it up to individual to discern truth, then the fact of the matter is that we will have diversity of belief...and then, how do we decide what is in our program? How do we balance

freedom and community? It's a perennial theme, and in my mind, that theme coalesces around the phrase, "The Diversity Which Unites Us," and I knew I'd used it before and I couldn't find it anywhere. After a frustrating morning of pasting that phrase into every search mechanism I could think of, I finally looked at it very, very closely.

And I realized that I'd been searching frantically for "The diversity which un-ties us."

That's the danger, isn't it? That the diversity that is a necessary part of who we are...as UU's, as world citizens, even as families... could also unravel us to the point of chaos. We are living in a world that is not much more diverse than it always was, but we are living closer to those diversities. People have always been different, but now we have to actually deal with the fact...at work, at home, on the street, in our congregations. George Will, reflecting on his newly acquired 80 years, last Spring, shook his pen in the New York Times as he remembered the "casual callousness towards minorities of all sorts," that was a part of what some elders call "the good old days." Things have changed. We're all adjusting.

It's hard work. But most of us, and the institution we relate to, the UUA, believes that it is good work, and necessary work. We believe in the worth and dignity of all people, we say, and in justice, and compassion...and not just for people who believe just like we do, or love just like we do, or who fluently speak the language we were first taught...but everybody. And I would hope that all of us who love this congregation and who feel our lives are better for its presence in Colorado Springs are eager to see it fitted out to thrive in the 21st century.

This congregation has done some good work of diversity. You are justifiably proud of the fact that you have long been a Welcoming Congregation for LGBT people, have advocated for justice for them in your state, have served Transgender youth....to this day, I'm sorry to

say, a matter of controversy in many places and congregations. You have been early adopters of the blessings of diversity. You are not new to this task.

You also have considerable religious diversity in your congregation. You specialize, as all UU congregations do, in the left-most end of the Free Church tradition and welcome atheists, agnostics, humanists, pagans, theists, people of Jewish heritage and many who have chosen a Buddhist spiritual practice, and the occasional liberal Christian to your ranks...that's just the ones I've come to know about in my 7 months here.

What do we do with all that diversity? Interesting question. Let's think about that in terms of a common diversity found in a family; everybody in the family wants to eat dinner together, but they like different kinds of food.

They can handle this in several ways. One way, perhaps a bit old-fashioned, but definitely a part of many families' life, would be the authoritarian way. Mom cooks meals she finds to be delicious and nutritious, and the family eats them. Usually, complaining is not allowed, and there are no substitutions. Sometimes finishing your plate is required. The idea is that "we are one family and we eat the same food." And...if you want to try something new? Mom has veto power.

I bet you are out there squirming a bit. Maybe that was how it was when you grew up and you probably don't remember it fondly, although you perhaps do remember that you came to like some things you had to eat. But, this doesn't sound very UU...and it's not. That sounds more like a creedal church where everyone is expected to believe the same thing. That's not us.

So there is another very well-worn path to a family with different tastes all eating the same dinner, and that's this: We make a list of all the things that everybody likes, and that is what we eat, and we make a list

of the things somebody absolutely hates, and we don't eat that. In this scheme, everybody has veto power.

My husband and I were blessed with a child...now quite a wonderful 30something with very diverse tastes..but as a child he was rather limited. When we made the list of things that everybody liked we came down to Tacos, Burritos, Enchiladas, Pizza, Hamburgers, Grilled Cheese. Breakfast for dinner, Iceburg Lettuce and peas. Plain Chicken with grumbling. You get the idea. My husband and I liked all of these foods too, and life was short, and we wanted to eat dinner together every night and so we caved. That's what we ate. When we wanted something more ambitious, we went out to dinner. It worked, sort of. It was fair, it was peaceable, and it was egalitarian. But I can tell you this, the first thing we said to each other after we dropped the kid off at his Freshman dorm was, "Now we can eat like Grownups again!"

The problem with a group only doing what everyone likes, all the time, is that that list tends to be pretty bland and boring. This might work well for a camping trip but as a 10 year long diet, well, you can imagine.

Many liberal churches, wanting to be fair and egalitarian and longing for a peaceable congregation, have tried this strategy for dealing with the religious diversity among them. I believe I have discerned it here. If some people think that prayer is pointless, there is never prayer of any kind in the service. If we can't all agree on a word for the Ultimate like God or Sprit of Life, we don't talk about that. If some people don't like a moment of quiet in the service, or lighting candles or greeting each other is just too much tactile contact, or singing makes us say things we don't necessarily believe, we just don't do that. (the Albuquerque congregation didn't own hymnals when I arrived in the late 1980's because, early on in their history, some members didn't like to sing hymns that may or may not reflect their feelings or beliefs. So, they didn't, except, ironically, at Christmas. The interim minister before me started them on singing in worship services. When they made the list

of what they could agree on for services, they agreed that they liked classical music and sermons that talked about the problems of the world. They didn't have a very wide appeal with a limited program like that, as you might imagine. But they did keep the peace and nobody every had to hear something that they didn't agree with. (except, ironically, at Christmas. Go figure!)

Is there another way? Yes, there is another way, and that way is kind of like a potluck, in which the worship services over time, offer a variety of languages, practices, and ideas for worshipers to use if they are attracted to them, try if they are feeling adventurous, and to ignore if they don't suit. In a situation like this, nobody has veto power. Or, more accurately, only the congregation's mission, democratically arrived at and interpreted, has veto power.

Consider one of those wonderful congregational potlucks that we hope to have again soon. Each family brings a dish that they liked and that they think some other people might like. The nice thing about a potluck is that there is enough variety that almost everyone can get an interesting and delicious meal. As people go through the line, they take what they want, they leave what they know they don't like, and if they are in the mood to be adventurous, they try something new. If they like it, they can find the cook and get the recipe.

Liberal churches that adopt this metaphor have a program with a lot of variety. Pagan group? Sure. Meditation? Yoga? Prayer group? Discussions? If a group wants to do it, it is a part of the program. Many churches in your fair, but rather religiously conservative city, do not operate like that. Yoga? That's somebody else's religion and we don't do that. Maypoles? No Way! Prayer Group? We have 6 of those already, no. Most Christian churches confine their potlucks to food. They believe very sincerely that they know what that elephant looks like already.

The potluck metaphor is easy to apply to the overall program of the church, because it mostly consists of small groups of people who want to do a particular thing together. How does a congregation that honors many religious practices, theologies, tastes in music, and allergies to same do Worship?

The way you do that is to emphasize in various ways, the “potluck” aspect of the worship services, inviting people to take in what they like, to try something new from time to time, and to enjoy their own thoughts when the inevitable things they don’t believe are being celebrated. A congregation that is doing that well will pay close attention to the balance of theological points of view, of kinds of religious language, of choices of music and hymn texts, with the hope that everyone will feel served by at least some parts of the service, and sometimes by nearly all of it.

This potluck strategy works in lots of kinds of diversity situations. Pronouns on name tags is a potluck strategy. It’s a way for people to be identified the way they want to be. Musical diversity is a potluck strategy. You hate what you are hearing? Relax. it’s just for today. It will be something else tomorrow. When worship planners carefully note the types of sermon subjects and theological languages offered, and tweak for balance, that’s a potluck strategy. Offering coffee, tea, and the cold drinks that younger people tend to like, rather than just coffee at social hour is a potluck strategy. Remembering that we all like to hear “our” music, be it Gospel, Good old UU Hymn tunes, or praise chorus-style singing is a potluck strategy. The turquoise hymnal...remember that? Is potluck strategy...an attempt to bring a new kind of musical resources to UU congregations. It is not the only way to manage a UU congregation, but it is a growth oriented one. If we only do what everybody likes, or even only what the majority likes, we appeal to fewer and fewer people...and at 1 15th of 1% of the population, we UU’s, we really can’t afford to be quite so narrow in the market. Better to open the doors wide and bring on the potluck!

Announce break out rooms and discussion. Those who want to just chat with friends can hang out in the main room. David at noon for treasurer's report

I offer you these good words of the Rev. Hosea Ballou, one of our Universalist forebears:

If we agree in our love for each other, than no disagreement we have will do us any harm. But if we do not agree in our love for each other, then no agreement among us, will do us any good. Remembering these words, we go in peace and go in love.