

## From Discomfort to Delight

Ah, I confess. Michael and I conspired to make you uncomfortable with that hymn. (No. 179 in *Singing the Living Tradition, Words That We Hold Tight*) We wanted to set you up for the sermon. Rick Warren, minister of the mega Saddleback Community Church in California, says, "Tell me the kind of music you use and I'll tell you whom you are trying to attract." Most of our music comes out of the Protestant tradition, and perhaps is a factor in our homogeneity. I doubt there are many Yorubans for us to attract in Saratoga Springs. Our city is 93% white, 3.5% African American and has only a few Native Americans, Asian and Hispanic Americans. Diversity hasn't really made it here yet.

And it hasn't made it to many of our UU congregations. The work of diversity is hard and long. We've been passing resolutions at our national General Assemblies for the past twenty years. Martin Luther King Junior addressed our General Assembly in 1966. We created a Black concerns working group in 1985. We passed resolutions declaring our intent to become more diverse, anti-racist, multicultural, in 1992 and 1997. In the last few years we have provided religious education curricula for children and adults about becoming anti-racist, anti-oppressive and multicultural. We now have a program to place and support ministers of color. And yet, we remain a largely white, mostly middle class, fairly highly educated religious movement. What can empower us to move toward more diversity? I'm convinced that part of the answer is spiritual. It's a spiritual discipline to become aware of our prejudices, to not act on them unthinkingly, to not separate ourselves from and refuse to interact with those who are different. It's about hanging in there even when we're scared, prying our hearts and minds open just a little bit more; and hopefully making that journey from discomfort to delight.

We've probably all had the experience of being different, perhaps being the "only one," and it is discomfoting. In 1995, I attended New Congregation Training at the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston. The training began on Wednesday and ended on Sunday evening. On Sunday morning we were divided into pairs and sent out to visit one of the four local UU churches. Then in the afternoon, we would reflect on our experiences. What was the service like? How were we made to feel welcome?

I was paired up with a male minister named Justin from North Carolina. It was decided that Justin and I would attend the Arlington Street Church, only a few blocks, just across the park, from the UUA. I knew that the minister was lesbian because I had heard her speak once in divinity school. And I knew that a lot of gay and lesbian people attended. Other than that I didn't think much about it. So off Justin and I went, for a pleasant walk to church. On the steps of the church we were greeted by a minister whom I also knew slightly, and knew that he was gay. Okay, no big deal. Once inside, we selected our seats maybe half way down the aisle. As we watched people gather, I began to get a little uncomfortable. Justin and I seemed to be the only heterosexuals in the place. Hmm, I wasn't so sure about this. I'm used to being in the majority, now I'm in the minority. I wasn't sure how to behave. I was afraid to say anything for fear I would unwittingly offend. I feared there were norms I didn't know about, in-jokes I wouldn't get. As the service moved along, people went forward to light candles and speak of their joys and sorrows. It took quite a while. Many spoke of friends who were suffering from HIV. Some had recently lost partners to the disease. My discomfort ebbed away as I began to see how much the people there were suffering. I had a new understanding and experience of

the depth of their pain. It didn't matter that they were gay and I was straight. I don't know that my discomfort became delight in that situation, but I moved beyond being pre-occupied with my fear to empathy and compassion.

We humans have many reasons for discriminating against others. Differences show up in skin color, body type, sexual orientation, gender, religious beliefs, language, ethnic group, customs, physical and mental ability, age, educational levels, and socio-economic class. All of these and more – especially age – can be the basis for prejudice and discrimination.

We tend to be uncomfortable when we are in the minority, because we feel unsure of how to behave. We don't know what the cultural assumptions are. And maybe, our adaptive unconscious is telling us, maybe we're even physically unsafe.

I moved to Saratoga Springs from Schenectady, a much more diverse city, about two years ago. When we lived there, the school district was educating children with 42 different native languages. Not surprisingly, children didn't do as well on standardized tests. In the grocery store, I might be waited on by an African American, or a woman in hijab, the loose fitting robes and headscarf of Muslim women. Here I mostly encounter white people in retail situations. When my children were young and I worked full time, we hired a young Vietnamese woman, a high school senior whose family had fled the war, to help with housecleaning and dinner on weekdays. One year, my daughter's partner for a school project was a refugee from Afghanistan. Diverse cultures were more a part of our life there. I have noticed that I feel safer walking alone at night in Saratoga Springs. And sometimes I wonder about that. Is it simply because there is more homogeneity? Or, is it because I am prejudiced, even unconsciously.

Sociologists and psychologists have a theory that prejudice is broken down, that we can move from discomfort to delight in differences, when we have enough contact with people who are different and when that contact occurs under the right conditions. They call it "contact theory." In 2003, the psychologist Thomas Pettigrew assembled a team to look at more than 500 studies on the topic. They found that "94 percent of the studies confirmed the basic theory that contact with members of other groups reduces prejudice, a figure that surprised even Pettigrew and his colleagues." And they found that it is true for prejudice based on "sexual orientation, age, mental illness, and physical disability." And it's true around the world. That's great news. It gives us hope that we can reduce conflict. ("New Study Bolsters Case for Affirmative Action," by Jennifer McNulty, *UC Santa Cruz Currents*, March 10, 2003)

Unfortunately, it did not address the question of religion, which is the source of much prejudice in today's world.

Pettigrew noted that how we "feel" about others is a greater predictor of behavior than what we think. For example, when I encounter a group of six African American teenagers after dark, my head may be saying, "Now don't be prejudiced, don't make assumptions," while my gut is saying, "You are in danger. Get out of here." My feelings are much more likely to drive my behavior than my thoughts. And in that particular situation, that may make sense. It is difficult to judge when I am feeling threatened or unsafe.

The question is how can we reduce suspicion and fear? How can we change the way we feel about those who are different? The only way we've found so far is through contact. But it needs to be contact of a particular sort. It works best when we can, before contact, learn

something about the other group. Then, we need to interact face-to-face under conditions which feel safe, and then have an opportunity to reflect on our prejudices, and hopefully, re-work them, let them go. Having a good time with someone who is from a different group may be the most important factor in changing the way we feel.

In the book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote about what's required if we want to change our reactions to difference. He said,

*"If you are a white person who would like to treat black people as equals in every way—who would like to have a set of associations with blacks that are as positive as those you have with whites—it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren't betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort. Taking rapid cognition seriously—acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives—requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions."* (page 97-98)

One of the slogans of the folks who work to reduce prejudice is "stories change hearts and hearts change minds." It's another way of saying that in the area of prejudice, feelings are as or more important than thoughts. If we change our feelings, we will change our thoughts, and to some degree vice versa. When we hear a story of prejudice being broken down, of two individuals encountering one another initially with suspicion and fear and judgment and then moving from there to affection, acceptance and embracing, we practice that journey in ourselves. That's one of the reasons media such as television and movies can be so powerful in breaking down prejudices.

I noticed watching television the other night a very tasteful kiss between a gay couple during the show *Brothers and Sisters*. And I thought, wow, that wouldn't have happened a few years ago. So, I started checking my reactions. How did I feel? Was I repulsed? . . . No . . . I was kind of celebrating. "Yay, we're getting there -- to the place where gay and lesbian people can be publicly affectionate in the same way as heterosexual couples." That's been a long journey. Growing up, I didn't know homosexuality existed – not until I got to college. It was invisible during my childhood, but I'm sure you can imagine what my fundamentalist church has to say today about being gay. In college, I learned that my high school boyfriend was gay. That was earth shattering, because it was such a taboo in the culture of my childhood. It has been a long journey for me to overcome that prejudice. But now I know many gay and lesbian people. I take delight in our friendships. And I am proud that probably at least ten percent of our congregation is lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and or transgender.

The ancient folk tale we know as *Stone Soup* is often used to illustrate the virtue of generosity. And reducing prejudice is a sort of generosity of spirit. In the Chinese version of the story, three monks arrive at a village seeking food. Initially, all the villagers are suspicious of the strangers, afraid of them. They huddle in their houses. But as the monks set up the cooking fire in the center of the village and begin to make their soup, one after another, the villagers venture from their homes, and encouraged by the monks, offer something for the soup. By the end of the story, everyone in the village has gathered to eat the wonderful soup which started out with only a stone. Through contact with one another, they moved from

discomfort, suspicion and fear to affection, trust, and delight in community. They found joy because they overcame their initial fear and got to know the stranger.

Within virtually all the world religions we can find exhortations to provide hospitality for strangers, exhortations to treat all humans as worthy. And yet, within religion we can also find much to divide humanity. Many religions claim to have found THE truth, and some go so far as to declare that those who disagree must be destroyed. This was a driving force in the Crusades of Christianity during the Middle Ages. It is a driving force in radical Islam today. Unfortunately, it is often those negative, destructive voices we hear in the media.

We preach, and seek to practice, something different. Not because we fear we won't grow if we don't embrace such diversity. Not because we feel guilty about being privileged by our social location, but because it is not only the right thing to do, but it will create the kind of world we want to live in – that world that Martin Luther King dreamt:

*"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . .*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (MLK, "I Have a Dream" Speech)*

King's emphasis was race. But race is only one of the prejudices which hold us in our discomfort zones. There are all those other differences as well.

Roberta Nelson has led the way in our denomination in recognizing the importance of religious education as ministry. In 2007 Bobby wrote an article entitled, " Even Secular Parents are Religious Educators --If you don't answer your children's religious questions, someone else will—and you may not like the answers they provide." Whether we like it or not, says Bobby, our children are growing up in a diverse world, and we, as parents are challenged by that diversity:

She wrote,

*" To raise children in the midst of the 'stunning diversity', we must educate for empathy, for a deep understanding of our shared humanity. And because so large a portion of our fellow human beings articulate their own meaning, purpose, and values through their religions, it is essential that our children know as much as possible about those religions: their beliefs and practices, their literatures and traditions, and their meaning to their practitioners. To be fully engaged members of the human society, they must be religiously literate."*

Bobby was addressing the question of children's religious education, but I think it is just as important that we adults learn about other faiths. As part of my new year's reflection I was re-writing my personal mission statement the other day. I articulate my mission as your minister to be in part to "bring to you the best wisdom from all the world's religious traditions, and to help you become literate and educated and informed about those traditions." That's why I quote from many different scriptures. That's why I try to bring stories from many

traditions. One of the things which keeps us from achieving the goal of diversity which we proclaim is an arrogance about religion. We UUs often dismiss others' religious beliefs as shallow or irrational or downright silly. And sometimes I might be inclined to agree with you. But, that attitude makes some people feel uncomfortable when they come here. Instead of being accepted where they are, being welcomed into the common search, they find judgment and putdowns, because they dare to articulate a theology we don't agree with, or probably even understand. It takes time to know one another's stories. It takes a willingness to become vulnerable. It takes courage. It takes a generosity of spirit.

Here are some of the "sins of judgment," prejudices and stereotypes which can get in the way of achieving the diversity to which we aspire.

"All theological liberals are also politically liberal."

"If you don't have at least some college education, you probably won't 'get' Unitarian Universalism."

"If you don't use correct grammar, we think you are uneducated."

"If you don't drive a Prius, you aren't really concerned about the environment."

"If you believe in God, you're not very smart."

"If you don't believe in God, you're not very spiritual."

As we recently undertook a joint advertising campaign of the four UU congregations in our region, we faced a dilemma. Our denomination aspires to greater diversity. Yet, the marketing consultants who advised us on how to use our advertising dollars most effectively, targeted households thought to be most compatible with our current way of thinking. To be included in our targeted mailing you needed to have certain characteristics. If you have young children, you're in. If you're too old, you won't be included. If you're perceived as having a certain level of education, you're in. If not, it's probably not worth the money to send you the post card. If you've demonstrated an interest in the environment you're in. If not, you might be weeded from the list. (no pun intended? : - )

Just as employers and universities struggle with competing values between "excellence" and affirmative action, we struggle with the competing goals of growing, which might be more likely to happen with people who are already "like" us, and our aspirations to diversity.

In a recent issue of *Tricycle, the Buddhist Review*, Sharon Salzberg, one of the leading teachers of insight meditation, suggests mindfulness as a way of seeing through and overcoming our prejudices. She asks,

*"Can we ever actually see another person? If we create an 'other' out of our projections and associations and ready interpretations, we have made an object of a person – we have taken away their humanity. We have stripped from our consciousness their sensitivity to pain, their likely wish to feel at home in their bodies and minds, their complexity and intricacy and mutability. If we have lost any recognition of the truth of change in someone, and have fixed them in our mind as 'good,' 'bad,' or 'indifferent,' we've lost touch with the living essence of that person. We are dwelling in a worldview of stylized prototypes and distant caricatures, reified images, and often very great loneliness."* (Winter, 2009, page 34)

We all carry in our heads judgments about and associations with groups of people. If we practice what the Buddhists call 'lovingkindness' and mindfulness, we suspend those judgments and engage with the person in the moment. Even the simplest practices can make a difference – even so small a thing as making eye contact with the teenage clerk in the retail store, or

matching our pace to that of the elderly person who moves a little slower than we, or simply a smile for the disabled person who forces us to wait before entering a building or a room.

So, the next time you are tempted to avoid or dismiss another person because they are somehow different, and therefore perhaps judged as inferior, I hope you will stop and think, become aware of the thoughts you are projecting onto the other person. Then, open your heart, listen to their story, and realize that beyond the discomfort lies the possibility and maybe even the promise of delight in a common humanity.

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