

First Unitarian Church

August 26, 2018

This month in the religious education program, our congregation's kids have been studying "unity and diversity." We are going to follow their lead this morning. The children started with Unitarian Universalism's seventh principle:

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Each part connected with the others. What happens to one, happens to all. What one does, affects the whole. That web is a beautiful thing. So poetic and true.

But as anyone who has ever been a member of a family knows, it can also be annoying. Like, be honest now, haven't you hidden cookies at some point in your life?

Yes. You did not want the other kids in your little part of the web to eat all of the cookies. Or maybe you were the parent and you knew the sugar was not good for the kids, who eat too much sugar as it is, but you yourself wanted and felt you had surely earned some cookies, so for the good of the kids you tucked them away your drawer with the secret pack of—well it doesn't really matter what else was in the drawer, it was good parenting, wasn't it?

I remember, when my kids were little, feeling like I was pulling two baby elephants along with me everywhere I went. We did not go fast. Although they were babies somehow they pulled enough weight to stop me in my tracks whenever they wanted. It took a lot of deep breathing when all I wanted to do was break into a stride. We were connected. At the same time, that connection was our most precious treasure. I wished it would never change.

Each of us is connected with others, and not just people we love, but people we do not know, and people we know but cannot stand. And we are connected with things that are not people. Animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and air.

All these different people. All these different things.

Diversity is the essence of existence. And so is unity.

That is what our seventh principle is about. The diversity of existence and the unity of all existence.

The concept of unity in diversity is as ancient as religion itself. Earth-based, indigenous traditions have long recognized it. And so do other great traditions, eastern and western.

Hinduism and Buddhism include the story of Indra's net, a vast, sparkling net that hangs in the abode of the great God Indra. It stretches out as far as you can perceive, and farther. As the Buddhist UU minister James Ford and Mary Isaac describe it,

Indra's net is like a spider's web in intricacy and loveliness, but this is no ordinary weaving for it spans the infinity of time and space. At each place where the threads of the net connect, a single glittering jewel has been hung; and since the net is infinite in dimension, there are an infinite number of jewels, too. They stretch out across the vastness of existence, suspended in and supported by the net, catching the light and twinkling like the stars. It is a beautiful sight to behold.ⁱ

Looking more closely at any one of the jewels, you would first notice its distinctive form and color, but then you would notice something else... that the jewel's radiance does not just come from itself. Each jewel also reflects the light of all the other jewels in the net. It is an infinite process of reflection.

Each jewel is constitutive of—helps create—the whole net. But each one reflects the whole as well and would not be what it is if it were apart from the rest.

Like Unitarian Universalism, Hinduism and Buddhism include quite a bit of theological diversity. There are many interpretations of the meaning and implications of this story. Yet the idea of unity in diversity underpins all dharmic traditions—traditions founded on ancient Hindu and Buddhist teachings such as Indra's net.

The whole does not owe its existence to the parts that come together to form it. Rather, each part reflects the whole because the whole universe is contained within every object and being. We don't make it. We are made of it. From this notion comes the phrase *Namaste*, the divine in me recognizes the divine in you. The very essence of being is expressed in each of us, and in everything.

In Indra's net, each jewel exists only momentarily, and then is replaced by another, different expression of the whole. In this way, reality is continuously being created.ⁱⁱ

The Judeo Christian traditions have another set of stories, beginning with Genesis where God says, "let there be light." In one of my favorite takes on Genesis, the writer Austen Hartke describes the diversity of creation with special attention to the unspoken details. The ancient Israelites tended to describe their world in binaries, Hartke writes. Light, dark. Water, land. Male, female. But, we also know that when these opposites were created, so were the in-betweens. Dusk, dawn. Marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs. And, as Austen Hartke can personally testify, people who do not identify with just one gender.

Sometimes conservative Christians point to Genesis as proof that God does not want people to be transgender, because the text says, "male and female, God created them." But as Hartke says, "this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn or dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries."ⁱⁱⁱ

Diversity. All from one source. United in one holy creation.

Later, the Hebrew Scriptures remind us of the unexpected ways we depend on one another. In the Exodus story, there is a tiny baby who will grow up to be a hero that rescues his people from slavery. It's Moses. And there is a villain, the Pharaoh, who wants him dead. To save his life, Moses's mother puts him on a tiny raft (what is translated as "basket") and sends him downstream on the river, hoping for the best.

Here I think of the families separated at our border. What would it take to let your child go, swept away from you by forces you cannot control? What would make you desperate enough to cut that precious connection that keeps them right beside you? And put them in a raft?

That's what Moses' mother does. And then, of all people.... the Pharaoh's daughter is the one who finds him, and plucks him out of the stream. When she unwraps his swaddling clothes, she quickly realizes that he is a Hebrew baby. But at great risk to herself, she takes him into her home—the Pharaoh's own home. She doubts the Pharaoh will ever pay close enough attention to the child to notice what he is. And she is right.

Who or what we think is our enemy may also be the source of our salvation. God is always present on the other side. An underlying unity.

When Jesus is asked to sum up God's commandments, he says, "Love."

Love your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. He says this in a context of diversity. Love is unifying, and it is a reflection of the deep unity we all share, in which we are from one source, and what we may call God is everywhere.

This unity in diversity is different than the Hindu and Buddhist ideas. It's personified in this God figure. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the metaphor is a net, not a person-like figure. Yet the teachings direct us to the same rule for living: treat one another with compassion, for each is from God or each is of the great source, each is precious, just like you.

This is how our religious ancestors arrived at the theology of universalism.

In Universalism, the imperative "love one another" is a reflection of God's essence, which is love.

Unitarian Universalists today speak often of the inherent worth and dignity of every person—our first principle. That's challenging enough—it's hard for many of us to imagine interacting with [fill in the blank with your villain of choice] as though they have inherent worth and dignity, when what we'd really like to do is kick them in the teeth. (An underrated fight move).

If we are to lean into our universalism, then we also have to take seriously that every person not only has worth, but is lovable and redeemable on the highest order.

The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed says that although he was already a Unitarian Universalist minister, he did not truly *get* universalism until one day in 1980.^{iv}

He was at the New York State Convention of Universalists. Gordon McKeeman was delivering the keynote speech that day. McKeeman had also served as president of the UU Service Committee, our denomination's human rights organization.

The UUSC was founded during World War II for the purpose of sneaking children out of Europe to save them from Nazi death camps. To this day the UUSC works in situations of extreme human suffering and human rights abuses. So McKeeman had firsthand knowledge of some of the most atrocious human behavior in the world. But he was a passionate Universalist.

Morrison-Reed was kind of spacing out, looking at stained glass and carved beams, when he heard McKeeman say that

Universalism came to be called the 'The Gospel of God's Success,' the gospel of the larger hope. Picturesquely spoken, the image was that of the last, unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable... to resist the power and love of the almighty."

"A divine kidnapping!" Morrison-Reed thought. "What kind of God is this?"

Well, for one thing, this God does not say, "Behave and you will be loved." You're just loved. There's no threat of damnation.

"Universalism's insight," Morrison-Reed says

is that you cannot coerce people into loving one another... No one has ever, or will ever, draw true love out of another with punishment. God's love is given to all and is a more positive force for good than fear ever will be. Love is not just stronger than fear, it is stronger than death. Love survives in us, thus all the departed reside in us.

This understanding of God is a personification of—it is a way of coming at—one of the most valuable pieces of wisdom in human history.

What if you had received unconditional love, from the moment of your birth? What if no one had ever taught you that you had to behave a certain way or be a certain kind of person in order to be loved? What if you just knew deep down, your entire life, your true worth? And never doubted it. That you are essentially lovable, worthy, desirable, and precious.

That would have been... *true*.

That's what you are. Feel what it would be like to know that... and then feel what it *is* like to know that.

That's what it means when we sing, on these Sundays "There is a love holding me, there is a love holding all that I love."

That's you.

Let that sink in. And then tell me... how will you live? Because once you know that about yourself, then you begin to know it about others too.

You've heard it said that you have to love yourself before you can love others. This is the real deal: you have to know your essential, unchangeable, irrevocable status as *beloved* in order to love others.

I mean in order to love them with that same kind of unconditional, transformative love. Not the everyday kind we take for granted.

Oh, you can be a hot mess and still love your children or your friends. But until you know your own belovedness, until you deeply know it, and you see the very heart of God reflected in yourself, you will only rarely glimpse it in others.

...

Now, we are a theologically diverse congregation. For some of you, this is a whole lot of God talk. Sometimes people ask me, "Angela, how do you preach when your congregation all believes different things?" And part of the answer is, well, they can disagree with me.

But you don't have to believe in God to understand the meaning of what I'm saying this morning. And you don't have to believe in God for it to apply to you.

Reflecting on the Bible's stories of interdependence and the imperative to love, the Rabbi Jonathan Sacks compares the world's ancient religious stories with a set of operating instructions for human beings. Instructions that answer the question "how shall we be human?"^v And he points out that now we have new sources of insight through scientific discovery. Sacks says:

...here we are reading those instructions afresh through the eyes of quantitative and experimental science and discovering what the great traditions of wisdom were saying three or 4,000 years ago.

We now know that... doing good to others, a network of strong and supportive relationships, and a sense that one's life is worthwhile, are the three greatest determinants of happiness.

And, you know, somehow or other, against our will sometimes, we are being thrust back to these ancient and very noble and beautiful truths.

That network of relationships and meaning, that practice of doing good, finds its strongest foundation in a strong sense of self worth. And, it also helps shore up that sense of self worth.

Like the jewels glittering in Indra's net, we reflect what is around us, and what is around us reflects what we are.

Realize your beloved-ness. And don't let yourself talk yourself out of it. It's not about ego. It's about being worthy of love. That is the foundation of everything that flows from you.

After the kids in our religious education program studied the interdependent web, then they went on to racial diversity and human unity.

Do you know that 74% of Albuquerque's youth are people of color, compared to 38% of Albuquerque's seniors?^{vi} Our city's population of people 65 and older is 38% people of color. But the population of people under 18 years of age is 78% people of color.

We see that generational shift happening also inside our congregation. The children are a much more racially diverse group than the elders. So they are leading us in that, too.

Maybe you thought that was where I was going to start this morning, with racial diversity. We do talk about racial diversity (and also racial justice) a lot around here. Or maybe you thought it was about political or theological diversity.

Instead we started with the fabric of existence and with God.

Well that's really the basis of everything else.

Once you know your own essential value, you know it is not dependent on social structures. This may be humbling or uplifting, depending on where you find yourself in the present structures, but either way it is liberating.

Now you are free to meet others with a sense of abundance within yourself. Able to be real and grounded. Now you are able to speak of what is meaningful to you, without fear of shame or diminishment. Now you are free to share your own vulnerability, especially where power has been imbalanced, especially where you have been in a place of privilege and power. We all experience at least some of that.

Now you can be vulnerable and you know you are okay. Beloved. Now you are ready to dismantle the self-protective walls we form between us, and experience the unity that encompasses all diversity.

I'm going to talk more about race, power, and vulnerability in a sermon on White Fragility on October 7th.

Today, we went back to the true beginning of that kind of conversation, that we don't—in the words of Richard Gilbert—rush to finish the picture, or hurry to mold the masterpiece.

But that you remember who you truly are, and what you are. And allow yourself to still be in the making, precious gem that you are.

May it be so. I love you.

ⁱ Quote is from the Touchstones Journal, August 2018, which adapts Ford and Isaac's work. For more about Touchstones, see touchstonesproject.com

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pragyata.com/mag/the-vedic-metaphor-of-indras-net-234>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hartke, Austen. "God's Unclassified World." *Christian Century*. April 25, 2018.

^{iv} Morrison-Reed, Mark D. "Dragged Kicking and Screaming Into Heaven." *Quest*. Vol. LXVII. January 2013.

^v <https://onbeing.org/programs/jonathan-sacks-the-dignity-of-difference/>

^{vi} "An Equity Profile of Albuquerque." A Study by PolicyLink and the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. June 2018. (p. 23). Accessible online at: <http://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/an-equity-profile-of-albuquerque>