

## Pluralism: A Pilgrimage of Curiosity

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, May 5, 2024

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reflection by Worship Associate Courtney O'Neill (printed after sermon)

Hymns: #1003 Where Do We Come From? #159 This Is My Song. #298 Wake Now, My Senses.

### Sermon

A few months ago, I picked up the phone and heard a young woman's voice. "Hello," she said, "I am a Muslim, and I would like to convert to Christianity. Can I join your church?" First, I asked her a few questions. Then I said, "Well, you are welcome to visit us and see if you like it. However, we don't expect you to change your faith to join us. That would be up to you. There are various religious perspectives here and a range of spiritual practices. We have some people who identify Christian and some who are Muslim. We have some Buddhists and atheists too. If you'd like to check us out, I'd be happy to meet you."

I encouraged her to think about it. I said, "Then, if you still want to become a Christian, I'd be happy to introduce you to some Christian ministers who could talk to you about the process to follow." So far as I know, she hasn't visited or called us back, but I hope she has continued her search and found what she needs. In my response to her, I was trying to explain that in this congregation, pluralism is a value we try to practice.

Pluralism is on the list of six shared values which are proposed for a revision of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. (This will be the first big revision since the Unitarian Universalist Principles were adopted 40 years ago. Delegates from congregations will vote on the document at our General Assembly next month.)

The proposed text to accompany the value of pluralism states: "We celebrate that we are all sacred beings/ diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with love, curiosity, and respect."

As my colleague the Rev. Heather Janules has written, "This value recognizes the profound differences between people. It encourages us to see these differences as opportunities to learn and grow."<sup>i</sup> In one sense, this proposal is a challenge to live out our values with more intention. At the same time, I think, it celebrates how much the UU movement has changed in the past half century. In a community, pluralism is not a steady state, but a process. It's an ongoing pilgrimage.

Across our 1,000 UU congregations, we now have many UU Pagans, Buddhists, and Christians as well as Humanists. Jewish UUs embrace the holidays and rituals of their Jewish heritage. In the last 15 years, a number of people who identify as Hindu and Muslim have started coming to UU congregations. Of course, we've always had members from Hindu, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds who no longer practice their faith, but what we've been seeing now are new Unitarians who bring their faith along. Some of them have gone to seminary to become UU ministers; they minister to congregations, serve in hospital and military chaplaincies, and lead community organizations.

There's a growing religious diversity in our ministry. A few years ago, in this pulpit we met the Rev. Ilene Kaur Tompkins-Gillispie, a young woman who told us how she became a member of the Sikh faith while remaining a UU minister. While she was here, I met her on Saturday evening at the Sikh Gurdwara in West Sacramento. She guided me through worship and chatted in the Punjabi language with our hosts. We stayed for dinner at their free vegetarian buffet.

My seminary friend the Rev. Abhi Janamanchi has preached here twice. He serves a large UU church in Bethesda, Maryland. A native of Southern India, Abhi is a Unitarian Universalist Hindu, but he notes he is a Hindu first.

The United States has been called a melting pot for a long time. The idea is that no matter one's ethnicity, no matter what other country or culture that our family came from, American culture melted us down into one unified community. "Out of many, one," says the Latin motto on U.S. coins [*e pluribus unum*]. Yet the apparent unity of the melting pot has really been a reflection of our dominant culture--white culture. This unity has neglected some distinctions which many people cherished as part of their identity.

An alternative image to the melting pot is a bowl of tossed salad. While there might be more lettuce than anything else, you can still see the other ingredients. In a salad bowl, we can appreciate the textures, colors, and shapes that add to the overall appeal. This is what pluralism is. The value of pluralism says: let's not gloss over the various and unique "ones" who make up the "many." Let's not dismiss what other people care about. Let's practice respect and curiosity.

But wait, you might say, doesn't *that* religion repress people, or this one? Are you saying we should accept every belief and every attitude?

I'm not. I'm saying that it's a mistake to assume we know the values that a person holds simply by looking at their religious identity. For example, some people say that atheists have no motivation to help others. "Without God, people have no ethics or morals. Just look at Stalin and the other atheists who led the Soviet Union, or Chairman Mao in China." People have said stuff like this. Dismissive attitudes like this need a dose of humility and curiosity. In the same vein, some people have criticized Unitarian Universalists as wishy-washy because of our diverse beliefs. They say we're "afraid to make a commitment." (Please don't tell this to our volunteers; they might not work so hard.)

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, it's true we are not held together by a uniform set of beliefs like a creed. We emphasize deeds over creeds. What *motivates* our deeds is a set of shared values. That is what hold us together. What calls us forward is our stated mission as a congregation. If someone comes here because they want to promote these values and pursue this mission, they are welcome.

Pluralism doesn't say that all religions are the same; there's a great variety among them. Pluralism inspires us to learn about this variety. Yet a congregation is not a school of religious studies. It's not possible for us to teach and learn everything about every religion. Of course, we do learn a number of things about religious traditions here. But the most important things we *can* learn are humility, curiosity, and respect. We can be curious about beliefs with which we're not familiar. Moreover, we can try to be curious about our own assumptions. For example, I might ask myself: How am I reacting? Where does my discomfort come from? Is this a reasonable attitude for me to have? Curiosity helps us to grow because it helps us to learn about ourselves.

To practice pluralism, it's important to be curious about the culture we inherit, learn, and participate in.

Earlier in Courtney's message, she talked about providing some experiences of pluralism to her children. Then she said this: "I also think about, as an adult, how often do I open myself to unfamiliar situations? How often do I hold space for other opinions, perspectives, and beliefs that might cause me discomfort?"

Perhaps this would be a good measure of any value we're going to claim as one of the top six of our denomination: Could it sometimes make us uncomfortable to live by it? If it's easy to do, why put it in writing?

There's an old joke that says Unitarian Universalists are not good at singing hymns because we are always distracted by the next verse. We read ahead to see if there is anything we will object to. If that was ever true, it's less likely now that our hymnbooks wait unused on the cart outside those doors and the words are projected on the screen one verse at a time.

If you come to church here, it's likely that our services will contain some things you like and other aspects you'd rather do without. This could be, for example, the words of hymns or prayers, our musical styles, sermon topics, joys and sorrows, or the length or shortness of our moments of silent reflection. I want you to know, however, that whatever might annoy you could be the very thing that someone else needs to get through their week. And some part of life here at UUSS that warms your heart/ might leave another person cold. In recognition of these diverse needs, our gathering together is an act of generosity and hospitality toward one another.

To be sure, many people come to Unitarian Universalism after feeling burned in a former tradition. It might have been repressive, hurt them, or betrayed their trust. Because of this, it's understandable that some aspects of life in a UU congregation could provoke strong feelings. The value of pluralism calls us to show a gentle openness to one another's experiences.

When I've stayed in the homes of people while traveling in other countries, it's been interesting to see how they do things differently—how they cook food and store it, what hangs on the walls, where people sleep, how they eat. It's not always comfortable to experience these differences, but I try to remain open. Having done this has helped me to consider the experiences of people from other cultures who visit *my* home. It also has caused me to consider the experiences of people who visit our congregations.

I have a story about the First Unitarian Society of Chicago. That stone church in a gothic architectural style blends in with the nearby campus of the University of Chicago. Among other high points in its history, in the late 1950s its music director began a children's choir to attract families. This grew into the Chicago Children's Choir, which now is a separate not-for-profit organization which serves 3,000 youth around the city in various neighborhoods and schools.

First Unitarian is also known for generating several African American leaders in our denomination, including ministers. It wasn't always an integrated congregation, however. This goal took intention, effort, and patience. In 1948, its all-white membership voted on a resolution to affirm its openness. It said: "We take it upon ourselves to invite our friends of other races and colors who are interested in Unitarianism to join our church and to participate in all our activities." That might sound rather mild, but in 1948, it was bold. The church's website informs us that there had been considerable opposition to that resolution. It passed, but they took two decades to make progress on their vision.<sup>ii</sup>

Years later, on a Sunday morning in 1993, before I had entered seminary, I gave a guest sermon for that church in their towering pulpit. I was there on behalf of a denominational program to encourage openness and inclusiveness when churches were selecting a new minister. In the sermon I mentioned that I was a gay Unitarian Universalist considering the ministry. It was a forgettable sermon, I'm sure. In coffee hour, a white woman approached me. She did not introduce herself. She did not thank me for coming. She *rebuked* me for coming out in the pulpit. She did not ask about my purpose in doing so, or express curiosity of any kind. Nor did she disclose any feelings of discomfort or confusion that had come up for her. She just snarled. In what I would later learn was a Swiss French accent, she said: "We don't need to know that." That reaction seems to fall short of the value statement about pluralism: "We embrace our differences and commonalities with love, curiosity, and respect." To me, that encounter shows why we must be clear about what our values mean.

Later on, while telling a friend in that church about my, uh, conversation... with that woman, I found out that her husband was a beloved professor of Unitarian and Universalist history at the theological school that I would be attending. (He was beloved, and he died in the late 1990s.) As a devoted UU scholar, he could have told her so much about the values of reason, freedom, tolerance, and pluralism in our movement's history. That's what he later taught *me* about. I learned about the pluralism lived by the Unitarians in the principality of Transylvania in the 1500s, and the courage of English, Welsh, and Scottish nonconformists in the 1700s, and the deep souls and wide visions of the American Transcendentalists in the 1800s. Maybe he had told her about all of that, and she didn't care. Perhaps she didn't come to church to learn or grow or practice curiosity, but only for the architecture and the glorious pipe organ. While her words had stung me, I was already a committed UU. However, I wonder how many newcomers to the church might have been hurt by her behavior, so that they gave up hope that it might become a home for them.

In a congregation, the value of pluralism means that we do not ask someone to leave *a part of who they are* at the door. Rather than reacting abruptly to something unexpected, we can be curious. And we can start with curiosity about ourselves.

The practice of pluralism also includes hospitality, intentional hospitality. Let's consider two things pretty commonly found in a church: coffee and food. Long gone are the days when we assumed everybody would consume the same thing, take it or leave it. Here at UUSS we try to be flexible. For coffee hour, our volunteers provide regular coffee, decaf, a choice of teas, sugar and sugar substitutes, and four kinds of creamer! (I happen to know that we also have a stash of hot chocolate.) When we put on a dinner here, volunteers provide options that might appeal to vegetarians, vegans, meat eaters, and people who eat gluten-free. The food is often labeled so you know what category it falls into. I am grateful for all of this.

While this may not seem like a big deal, getting to this level of hospitality took intention and lots of effort. It called for openness and care. Surely new things will appear which we haven't covered. Surely we will make mistakes. That's part of being in a community. Yet we strive to care and respond with openness.

I think our approach to coffee hospitality and church dinners could provide examples for practicing hospitality in other ways here, and in our own individual encounters, within and beyond these walls. We recognize that there are differences, and we want to learn about them. We are open to considering our assumptions, and we try to respond instead of reacting.

Pluralism is not a steady state; it's a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey that you *choose* to make. It's a journey of attention and curiosity, of openness to surprises, and even of an acceptance of discomfort along the way. A pilgrimage can be done alone or alongside others, together. Let's do it together.

On this journey, let us embrace our differences and commonalities with love, curiosity, and respect. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

#### Personal Reflection (by Courtney, Worship Associate)

I'd like to share with you a story from a couple summers ago, when my husband Michael and I were trying to figure out how to keep our kids occupied while on vacation from school. One of the many activities we enrolled them in was a week-long church camp. Now: aside from attending UUSS, our kids don't have much religious structure. We encourage mindfulness. All three of our kids to some extent practice quiet breathing, and even a little guided meditation.

But nothing like was going to prepare our kids for the culture at your average, non-denominational Christian church camp. Here's how the week went. On Monday, when the kids got home, we asked them about their first day. Rebecca told us, darkly: "There was a lot of praying. A LOT." We told her, "Be respectful when other people pray, but you don't have to pray if you don't want to." She then went on to tell us, "Oh I didn't pray – in fact, I told other kids around me that we are all free not to pray." Michael and I tried to explain that you can have a middle ground between participating in prayer and igniting a revolt, but this concept seemed to go over her head.

A couple of days later, I asked Charlie how he was enjoying the camp. He told me, "It's super fun! The theme of the camp is called The Great Mystery. Every day we get another clue and at the end of the week we will get to solve it!" Then he told me that the clues he had gotten so far were the words, "ask", "seek", and "knock". He promised to keep me updated on the final clues to solving The Great Mystery.

Later that same day, I asked our son Jack how he was enjoying church camp. His response to us was, "It's fun. There are obstacle courses and popsicles."

On the last day of camp, Michael picked up our kids. Throughout the week, Rebecca had somehow managed to balance an active resistance to organized prayer with a willingness to socialize and had made some friends. Jack had been declared the obstacle course champion. And Charlie...well, Charlie had been looking forward to finding out the answer to the Great Mystery all week, and was a bit nonplussed to find out that the answer was that Jesus was in his heart. Charlie is a very literal person, and spent a lot of time lecturing anyone nearby about the physical impossibility of another person living in your literal heart, and the medical complications that would cause.

As I said, this was our kids' first experience in a religious culture that was different from our own. And their reactions were all specific to each of them and their own life experiences up to that point. In retrospect, it was a great way to introduce them to the bigger concept of religious pluralism – which, according to Wikipedia, is "harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions." UUSS is the church community that best fits our family, but it's also important to us that our kids are introduced to other religions – as well as difference races, cultures, social, and political beliefs.

Their weeklong experience at Church Camp is a fun story, but it's also an experience in learning to connect with people that see the world differently. It's teaching them to put themselves in unfamiliar situations – situations that can cause discomfort, anger, disappointment. We didn't think about all those things when we originally enrolled them in this camp, but years later, that's one of my main takeaways. I also think about, as an adult, how often do I open myself up to unfamiliar situations? How often do I hold space for other opinions, perspectives, and beliefs that might cause me discomfort? Because pluralism is great when we think about embracing diversity and multi-culturalism. But pluralism also involves embracing our own discomfort when we find ourselves in situations we have never experienced.

The Church Camp experience is a defining one for our family, in a variety of ways. It's an entertaining story, but it's also a reminder to me about how important it is that I continue to seek out different perspectives and beliefs, no matter how uncomfortable that may make me.

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<sup>i</sup> Heather Janules, Winchester Unitarian Society website, February 29, 2024, accessed May 4, 2024. <https://www.winchesteruu.org/2024/02/29/pluralism/>

<sup>iii</sup> First Unitarian Society of Chicago website, accessed May 4, 2024. <https://firstuchicago.org/our-roots/>