

Out of Many, One

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Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia by Marilyn Giese.

The majority of the text of this sermon is taken from the report by the Commission on Appraisal of the UUA entitled "Engaging Our Theological Diversity"

This past summer has had numerous events attempting to bring individuals and countries together in a sense of Oneness. The Olympic Games was probably the most spectacular, as we watched the competition between countries - all in the name of Unity and physical prowess. The idea of an Olympic Truce in which nations and individuals would abstain from fighting during the Olympic Games was first established in 776 BC and called Ekecheria (Olympic Truce). During the ancient Olympic Games three runners known as spondophoroi were sent from Elis to the various participant cities at each set of games to announce the beginning of the truce. During this period armies were forbidden from entering Olympia, wars were suspended and legal disputes and the use of the death penalty were forbidden. The truce was primarily designed to allow athletes and visitors to travel safely to the games, and was for the most part observed, although Thucydides wrote of a situation where the Spartans were forbidden from attending the games and fined 200,000 drachmas for assaulting the city of Lepreum during the period of the ekechiria, claiming that the truce had not yet taken hold.

This truce was observed for twelve centuries, making it the longest lasting peace accord in human history. Since the renewal of the Olympic Games in 1896, the adoption of Ekecheria during the games is done for each year that the games are held. In 2004, 180 nations agreed to observe Ekecheria in Beijing during the games held in Athens. The purpose of the runners with the flame is the same as that of the spondophoroi - to announce to the people that the truce will begin on the date of the next Olympiad. There have always been trucebreakers - not every year, but a handful of times over the past hundred plus years of the modern olympiad. Yet it is the desire of the many to seek a Oneness for peace that holds the olympiad together and gets all of us to sit for hours spellbound in front of the television as we watch the youth of the world amaze us with their physical abilities.

We all wondered whether or not either of the political parties would get it all together by the time of their conventions. And we watched the choreography proclaim this miracle before our very eyes. When the election takes place this November, it will be like the race for the gold at the Olympics. Only one team can achieve the gold. Then the process will begin again to achieve Oneness in the name of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights that were established as "the center that holds" by our forefathers.

As an inclusive church attempting to provide a home for an extremely diverse constituency, the question to be asked is "What Holds Us Together?" This is precisely the question that the UU Commission on Appraisal addressed in its four year study of our Theological Diversity. Through forums and focus groups, the Commission attempted to weave together the stories of individuals who claim the label of Unitarian-Universalist. In their report, which can be found on

the internet, they include numerous quotes from individual focus groups. I'd like to share some of these with you:

"I have a vision of the UU movement as interreligious dialogue. As we respectfully share those things of ultimate importance to us we are mutually transformed. This is a model for the rest of the world, a better way to do religion. I believe that we do not need theological unity in our theological diversity" - from adult GA workshop participants.

From adult focus group participants: " Unitarian Universalist congregations are often congregations of people who didn't fit in. And so we create communities that are awkward, because that's how we know how to be! To me this is where the UUA falls down, and why you have CUUPS and the Buddhists and the Christians and all these little subgroups-because we offer the hope of a spiritual journey, and we offer no tools to do it with. We stay in the head, and we don't talk to the heart..What people need is touching and tasting and smelling and being, and not just talking about touching and tasting and smelling and being."

"Having a common belief would actually allow for more diversity. We talk about class issues and race issues, all those things, the need to have something to hold us together, and we don't have a belief that does, so it ends up being class, or it ends up being race, or it ends up being education level or economic level. And that's a problem. So I think having a common belief would allow us to become more diverse in all those other ways."

"I'm no longer convinced that you can have the omni-inclusive church, you can have the one-size-fits-all church, or even the one-size-fits-all denomination. But I think that's kind of the cultural common wisdom that goes around the UUA, that is what we're trying to do. And I think that's part of the pain of talking about trying to find a center, because we're all so terribly worried that we're going to find a center that excludes somebody."

The Commission voiced the opinion that despite the consensus with the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important for these times, conversations with UUs across the country led them to wonder if theological diversity is getting in the way of building a strong, effective religious voice. In the words of UU historian Conrad Wright, "Even the freest of free churches needs discipline if it is to last long enough to accomplish anything of value in this world."

Young people and young adults are increasingly interested in spirituality. Typical of this is the remark by one member of a youth focus group. "I wish that there were more of a focus on theology and beliefs because I've been personally really struggling with it, and I sometimes get really scared about death and God and where am I going to go, because I'm scared to death that there's nothing, and honestly I'd rather believe in God and heaven and die believing I'm going somewhere than just dying and saying, "I'm going nowhere." Sometimes I really wish I were Christian just so that I'm not scared at night."

There is a huge wave of people hungry for a sense of belonging and meaning, people who want a place where they can safely pursue a spiritual path in the company of people who will support and challenge them; a place that embraces reason, yet transcends the rational and touches the soul. However, the consensus of experts from organizational development to systematic theology agree that to grow effectively, a religious organization needs clearly defined boundaries. And, one cannot put even the most permeable boundary around nothing. Healthy diversity requires common ground.

One fact that became very clear during the four years of this study is that with rare exceptions, conversations about beliefs and theology are not regular features of our congregational life. In this congregation we have attempted to be a rare exception - hence the classes in Building Your Own Theology, and Articulating Your UU Faith.

A few years ago, Rev. William Sinkford, president of our UUA began to articulate his goals for the UUA and began to initiate a conversation in UU circles about a "language of reverence." This issue is of vital importance to our movement, and we ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregation at our peril.

Last year during this Ingathering Service I led an exploration of "Who Is Your God?" This congregation is extremely diverse, theologically. The Commission struggled continually with this situation, and over time there was a natural tendency to fall into analogy and symbolic thinking. This was somewhat helpful to the Commission, considering the words of Biblical scholar Marcus Borg: "Metaphors can be profoundly true, even though they are not literally true. Metaphor is poetry plus, not factuality minus. That is, metaphor is not less than fact, but more. Some things are best expressed in metaphorical language; others can be expressed only in metaphorical language." Thinking in metaphorical terms about the issue of what holds UUs together may provide a psychological distance that helps us explore options our emotional sensitivities would otherwise prevent.

The initial proposal that led to this study by the Commission included a quotation from theologian Martin Buber that became a useful point of reference. This quote contains its own metaphor: "The real essence of community is to be found in the fact - manifest or otherwise-that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations; the circle is described by the radii, not by the points along its circumference."

The circle analogy captures some aspects of community that are relevant to the issue of how the range of theologies to which we adhere affects our congregation. The center of a circle is a common reference point for all points on the curve; it is equally important to all the points and equidistant from them. The center can be thought of as a common source, as a bonfire around which a circle of people may gather for sustaining warmth. And of course, a circle can have only one center. A parallel analogy to the center of a circle is that of a core. In a piece of fruit, growth occurs from the core outward. Viewed historically, Christianity clearly is that from which we have grown. But can a commitment to the humanity of Jesus still be thought of as somehow central for us on an institutional level, or have we collectively moved so far from our origins that its relevance is limited? A living cell has a nucleus at its core; it holds the genes that define the organism. It has been suggested that our current crisis of identity is partly rooted in a failure to merge the unique theological perspectives of our ecclesiastical ancestors. Imagine the combining of sperm and ovum without the blending of the genes at the core.

Do we indeed have a core? Or has the evolution of our community outpaced the evolution of our self-understanding? Another perspective suggests that Buber's emphasis on the center rather than the circumference is backward: a community can be defined by its circumference if that edge is seen as a boundary, the way a vessel or a living cell is defined or bounded by its outer surface. As much as UUs wish to be inclusive and welcoming, from a sociological point of view membership in a community or group is based on the sharing of some characteristics that people outside the community tend not to share; distinctiveness requires the making of distinctions.

Does the UU community have a boundary? If not, should it? Are there beliefs that are incompatible with being a UU? Are there behaviors that are antithetical to membership in UU congregations?

With the UU dedication to freedom, UUs are adverse to drawing lines and marking boundaries, and this hesitancy has made it difficult for us to define ourselves relative to other faith communities in the larger religious economy. This difficulty with self-definition has in turn sapped our energy for evangelism.

Picture yourself as a participant in these last Olympics. You are a gold medalist in the pole vault. When you go back to your country you're not going to hide in your house and refuse to talk about your experience. You probably will go on a forty city tour - trying to inspire future Olympians, and advocate for peace. If you were a delegate to either of the political party conventions, will you come home and keep silent? No!! You will become an outspoken advocate for the core beliefs of your party in the hope that your candidate will get the gold medal.

The heart is another commonly mentioned analogy for what we are trying to identify. A heart is a source of sustaining life, a motivating force, a place from which energy emerges. A heart is necessary but not sufficient for human life; an individual's survival is impossible without it but it isn't good enough by itself. The heart may not be large, but it is vital. The concept of "credo," usually thought of as a statement of individual belief, can be traced etymologically to the notion of "that to which I give my heart" - a commitment that is more emotional than intellectual in nature.

Does our faith have a "heart"? if so, what is it, and is it healthy? If not, how long can it live without one? What are our common threads? If we have trouble identifying them, is it because they do not exist or just that they are hard to cast in words with which everyone can agree?

Starr King president Rebecca Parker posed this question to the Commission: "What features of Unitarian Universalism, if you took them away, would leave us with something that is no longer Unitarian Universalism? The Commission held a workshop at the 2004 General Assembly in Long Beach and asked participants to struggle with this question. The response was creative and excited, but no definite answer was determined that afternoon. Dr. Parker's question, however, leads to one that is even more provocative but also riskier: What, if you added it, would make Unitarian Universalism no longer Unitarian Universalism? In other words, in addition to considering what is necessary or essential to Unitarian Universalism, we must also ask what is antithetical or contrary to Unitarian Universalism. In the course of brainstorming, one suggestion was, "What would a person have to do, or believe, to get thrown out of a UU church? The fact that such a question could even be formulated indicates that there are UU antitheticals, just as there are UU fundamentals or quintessentials.

How can we define what it means to be a UU, both for the benefit of those of us on the "inside" and in order to enhance the understanding of the larger society? If you are an Olympian, you have clothing that calls attention to your status, even if you haven't won a medal. Also, the news media identifies you as an individual who has achieved a level of skill that is far above that of your competition. If you are affiliated with a political party, you may wear a button, or several indicating your status as Republican, Democrat, Green, or Libertarian. You take every opportunity to talk to others about the beliefs (platforms) of your party.

If you are a UU, (besides driving a hybrid car) how are you physically identified to those who are not UU? Do you wear the jewelry, or have a lapel pin? Is there a bumper sticker on your car that so identifies you? What about the idea of having a nice collared knit shirt with the Chalice symbol embroidered on the front and the words Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia on it? Do you have a sticker in the front window of your house or one of the windows in your car that says Unitarian Universalist? Could the Principles and Purposes constitute our platform? Do you have copies of the red flyer to hand out to others when the conversation turns toward religion? How about calling cards for each member with information about the fellowship, along with the individual's name and phone number?

We are called to the disciplined embodiment of our values and commitments and the strengthening of those qualities that will help us to live them with integrity - to be more whole and to contribute to making the world more whole. Every strand of the UU tradition holds up a mirror to our lives and to the society in which we live. Each brings both critique and constructive practice. Every strand has evolved in recent decades toward a more inclusive vision of wholeness and interconnectedness. Each brings a somewhat different perspective and body of wisdom to the circle of dialogue. As UUs grow more diverse, we are also growing toward more solid common ground.

The UUA is an intentionally noncreedal religious body, and individual freedom of belief and conscience are central to UU values; thus we cannot make universal statements of faith that apply to all of us individually. Yet the Commission came up with some suggestions that are central and uniting.

"As Individuals:

“We base our convictions upon our own experience of the depth dimensions of life, which is richer and more complex than any words or concepts we use to describe it. Individuals experience this depth encounter in relationship to many and different aspects of life and name it differently. For some, the most powerful encounters are with aspects of themselves, or mentors, or others within community; other people find them in the natural world or in inspired writings or ideas. Some define what they encounter as "God" or "mystery"; some use other words. Such profound encounters often have the power to transform us when we cannot willfully transform ourselves.

“We embrace a sense of possibility - an openness to what is unknown-the not-yet, the new, the different-an openness that fosters qualities of authenticity, curiosity, creativity, courage, and compassion, all of which nurture hope and healing in our world.

“We are committed to being people of character. We value education, examples, and disciplines that strengthen our ability to be responsible citizens of the earth and our society - honest and committed, kind and generous, reasonable and persistent, courageous when need be and able to be true to our values in the face of social pressure to be otherwise.

“As Communities

“We claim a vision of religious community that protects and respects individual freedom, fosters acceptance, and supports an active quest for greater understanding and deeper meaning and purpose. We strive to create a place where the authority of the individual conscience is acknowledged and cultivated, where disciplined inquiry is encouraged - a community friendly to wisdom from the sciences and social sciences as well as to the wisdom of many faith traditions.

“We share a conviction that wisdom emerges from the process of dialoguing across our differences in community. In dialogue we are challenged to examine our assumptions and to be open to growth and transformation, and to develop skills in communication that serve our world well.

“We are committed to a religious community as a place where we work together for a more just and compassionate world. It is not enough to gather in a safe, supportive sanctuary for ourselves alone. We must be visible and present to those who need us. Our experience of religious community strengthens us to go forth into the world empowered to make a difference.”

Beginning on page 92 of this 195 page report, the Commission lays out a vision that can be claimed by all strands of the UU tradition. You will find the statements of this vision on the handout. I hope that the message today will inspire you all to take advantage of the opportunities within this community to grow in faith and practice. And for those who can, to offer their talents to carry this Fellowship into realms of achievement that is beyond imagination - truly, going for the gold!