

“True Colors”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, June 13, 2021

Reading: “All of Us Are Beautiful” by Thomas Rhodes:

We come in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes.

Some of us grow in bunches.

Some of us grow alone.

Some of us are cupped inward,

And some of us spread ourselves out wide.

Some of us are old and dried and tougher than we appear.

Some of us are still in bud.

Some of us grow low to the ground,

And some of us stretch toward the sun.

Some of us feel like weeds, sometimes.

Some of us carry seeds, sometimes.

Some of us are prickly, sometimes.

Some of us smell.

And all of us are beautiful.

What a bouquet of people we are!

Sermon/Homily

Science tells us that we share 55% of our DNA with a banana tree, 80% with a cow, 98.5% with a chimpanzee, and we share 99.99% of our DNA with every other human being on the planet. One ten-thousandth of the DNA in our genes is responsible for all the variety we see in humanity, all the different hues of skin color, hair color, eye color. All the body shapes and sizes. All the differences in gender identity and sexual orientation. A small difference makes for a lot of variety.

These numbers cause some of us to say, “See? We are really all the same.” And, yes, we are the same in many ways. We humans are the same in our basic need for food, shelter, water, health, and health care. We are the same in our need for purpose, learning and growth, respect, and love. We are the same in our humanity and our human rights. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with this statement:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Our Universalist theological heritage teaches that all humans are equally worthy of God’s love and loved by God, in all the ways that we may name the holy. It is a universalist impulse that leads us to assert that we are all the same. And this has been a dominant message in our Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities for many years: we are all the same, everyone is welcome, all beliefs are welcome, there is room for everyone.

I don’t think this message of welcome has ever really been totally true, in a couple of ways. First, while we might like to say that all beliefs are welcome, there are beliefs that are not consistent with our principles and values. You cannot claim to be a UU and believe that some people are not worthy of human rights or love; you cannot believe that some are more worthy than others. This belief in supremacy would go against all of our principles and especially our first principle, which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

So, I suggest that it is most accurate to say that, as a non-creedal faith, Unitarian Universalism welcomes many beliefs and a variety of beliefs, but not all beliefs. We have shifted from a focus as faith that holds a diversity of opinions to a faith that is anti-oppressive. Beliefs that foster actions of oppression are not welcome.

Second, recent years have brought to light the ways that some have not felt welcome in UU congregations. In communities where an anti-God humanism is strong, those who

identify as Christian may not feel welcome. I have heard that sentiment in this congregation from some who cherish their Christian roots and beliefs. In the past 20 years or so, those who seek spirituality say they may not feel welcome in communities that focus on social justice, as if those two things are not connected.

And, in the past few years, we've heard again the stories of black, indigenous and people of color in our faith who say they stay / despite feeling on the margins in our congregations as well as in our society.

We say that all are welcome, and sometimes we have a hard time acting in ways to make this real for those who are already marginalized.

And so, I think there has been a shift in our message in recent years. What I hear more now is that all people are welcome, but not all behaviors are welcome. If your beliefs and values lead you to behave in ways that demean, disrespect, and oppress others, we will ask you to act in line with our covenant based on our values. If someone refuses, we may ask them to leave the community. This doesn't happen often, but it happens.

And, I have seen a shift in focus on spirituality and theology. Many of us have come to understand, through experience and learning, that justice work is unsustainable without spiritual grounding in community. Many of us are seeking meaning in our lives and want to deepen our relationships with ourselves, others, and with something greater; within, among and beyond.

I have also noticed a shift in focus as we recognize the limitations of sameness. Research has shown that diversity in groups and in the workplace contributes to creativity and innovation. When difference is not only noticed and tolerated but encouraged and celebrated, amazing things can happen. We are better together, with all our differences.

A push toward sameness can minimize and even ignore / that differences impact who we are and how we are in the world. I cannot ignore or deny that my life experience as a white heterosexual cisgender woman is very different than that of a 20-year-old gay black man in Olympia, or a 30-year-old widow in India, or a 40-year-old transwoman in Uganda, or a 50-year-old bisexual Hispanic man in California. I don't know what it is like to live in fear that my skin color or sexual orientation or gender identity will get me abused or killed. And I cannot deny that this is the reality for some people.

The idea of sameness can also contribute to oppression, the oppression that robs us all of our humanity. For example, the message that all lives matter ignores the reality that all lives can't matter until Black Lives Matter. Yes, we all matter, and this is not real if some are treated as less than and as long as we ignore how differences are treated in our society.

So, are we the same or are we different? Well, yes. Same and different is another false binary, like the gender binary, male and female. We are the same and we are different, both. We humans can notice and appreciate paradox, so we can hold these seemingly opposing statements, both as true. We are the same in our humanity and needs, and we are different in other ways including our experience of the world. This means that we can come together in community, sharing values and principles, and behaving in covenant and accountability. And, that we can also recognize that there is a need for gathering in groups based on identity or affinity, groups based on race or gender or gender identity or sexual orientation or age or any of the many ways that humans vary. We can be together and apart, the same and different.

This month we take time to celebrate Pride, honoring the Stonewall Inn uprising of June 1969 that sparked the liberation movement for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or any identity other than heterosexual and cisgender. On that night more than 50 years ago, transwomen said "no more" to persecution and prosecution, refusing to go quietly-again- when police raided, again, one of the only spaces where LGBTQ+ people could gather in Manhattan. Those who

had been at the Inn banded together to call for gay rights, trans rights, human rights. And, then others in the neighborhood joined them. In the face of violence and oppression, the differences were less important than our common humanity.

Today we join many Unitarian Universalist congregations in celebrating flower communion. This ritual is often used to mark the end of the program year in a congregation, the June date when children's religious education classes end or shift, and when Summer services and Summer programs begin. It marks the turning of the seasons and the cycle of the congregation's year.

The flower communion ritual was created by Rev. Norbert Capek, who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this special service to his church on June 4, 1923. He wanted a ritual that would bind people more closely together, like the traditional Christian communion, but in a format that would not alienate any who had left other religious traditions. He turned to the native beauty of the countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to his community and brought into worship the beauty of a field of wildflowers. The flower communion was brought to the United States in 1940 and introduced to the members of the Cambridge, Massachusetts Unitarian Society by Capek's wife, Maja.

The traditional flower communion ritual is simple; people bring a flower from their garden or elsewhere, and all the varieties of flowers are gathered in vases at the beginning of the worship service. The flowers are gathered and blessed, then at the end, each person is invited to take home a flower different from the one they brought.

Flower communion celebrates that no two flowers are alike, just as no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together they form a beautiful bouquet, which would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower. The ritual of sharing flowers binds us together and celebrates our differences. Just as the individual colors of Pride are sewn together to create a beautiful flag. So, it is with our

community: it would not be the same without each one of us bringing and sharing our true colors, our truest selves.

Our flower communion is a bit different again this year, just like last year. We asked you to send in photos of your beautiful selves and beautiful flowers. Thanks to those of you who did. Let's enjoy images of our lovely bouquet of community.