



October 9, 2022

## **Celebrating Our Differences**

We are different and we are one. We explore this paradox and how we bridge differences in a world that seems divided. This service includes music and a sermon requested by Atley and Sheila Ralston in honor of their OUUC annual auction purchases.

### **Sermon - Rev. Mary Gear**

#### Reflection One

Like many people in relationship, my husband, John, & I are the same in some respects and quite different in others. He is a loud extrovert to my quiet introvert. He likes lots of options and goes seeking more, while I like to take a few and consider them deeply, getting overwhelmed with too many choices. Over the course of our relationship, we've been challenged by our differences on occasion.

And, like people who are in a relationship of any kind, we've found ways to acknowledge and handle those differences. At our house, it usually goes something like this: we'll have a discussion and go back and forth, negotiating and talking. Then one of us will realize that we're struggling with differences in personality—often it's John who notices first. And, then he'll give me that look. You know that look that you get from a dear one that says, "I know that I'm bugging the heck out of you, and don't you love me anyway?" Do you know that look? Well, he'll give me that look, and he'll say, "Celebrating our differences!" Usually that breaks the tension, making us smile or laugh, even if celebrating is not exactly what's happening between us right then.

I mentioned earlier that this sermon was requested by Atley and Sheila Ralston. As I spoke with them about what prompted them to bid so passionately for an auction sermon, they told me about dear friends who they love and with whom they have many differences. These are beloved friends that share history and memories, experiences and activities, some values and beliefs. These are also friends who are very different in their political and religious beliefs. Sheila and Atley's theological and spiritual question was: Given that we are all connected, how do we manage differences? I believe this is our most pressing theological, sociological and cultural question. How we answer that question informs how we behave, both as individuals and as a society.

Rita Gross is an American Buddhist feminist theologian and author who has written on the subject of “Religious Diversity.” She suggests that the monotheistic religions, those with one God, have historically used religious diversity as a basis for contention, or conflict, rather than to create community.

She asserts that humans have historically had two responses to religious diversity: we either censure the other, calling each other inferior and accusing each other of idolatry, or we claim that the other is just like us—we’re all the same, we all worship the same God. Both responses elevate one religion over another.

The first response, calling the other inferior, clearly puts one religion above another. Because we are a faith tradition that draws from many sources, Unitarian Universalists usually reject this approach. And I think it is the root of our hesitation to share the good news of our tradition; we don’t want to suggest that our way is the only way.

The second response to religious diversity--we’re all the same—also creates superior and inferior. Often the person who says we are all the same is suggesting that all religions are just like their religion, which is of course the best one. “We all worship the same God” often means “that God is my God.” It erases differences and pushes toward uniformity, sameness. This defines “normal,” which also defines “not normal.” And that is what creates a supremacy culture which elevates one characteristic above others, whether it is religion or skin color or gender or something else.

Gross is not suggesting that we can’t find shared values or common ground between religious traditions, or across any other differences. She is suggesting that reaching out to the other is hard work that we have historically not done this very well.

So, perhaps the first step on our path to celebrating differences is to recognize and accept that they exist.

We are different and we are one.

### Reflection Two

Atley and Sheila described to me an experience in their undergraduate days that was important for their spiritual growth. In 1954 or 1955, they attended a Campus Conference on Religion, which was a panel of religious leaders from several faith traditions. As young students, they were so impressed by the way the leaders listened to each other, respected each other, even cared for each other, and worked hard to find common ground despite their theological differences. Sheila and Atley were inspired by this example of bridging differences, and it gave them hope for peace.

Atley told me that all the religious leaders on that panel were men. There was some diversity of religion, but no diversity in other ways, and so there were voices left out of the discussion, not even invited to the table. Not that there weren’t religious leaders at that time who were women or non-binary, even in the mid-1950’s, but

they were not the norm and certainly not the expectation of most people. In my own training as a minister in this century, I had to overcome the barrier of my belief that a religious leader couldn't look like me; I certainly didn't experience that in my childhood.

In his book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion, Jonathan Haidt, writes, "The process of converting 'pluribus' (diverse people) into 'unum' (a nation) is a miracle that occurs in every successful nation on Earth. Nations decline or divide when they stop performing this miracle."

Bridging our differences is a miracle—and a challenge. Humans, like all animals, are hard wired to notice differences; it's a survival mechanism. In the wild, different can mean danger. The ability to notice differences can determine life or death.

We teach children to identify differences and define the ability to notice differences as a developmental milestone. Do you remember the song from Sesame Street? (sing: One of these things is not like the others. One of these things doesn't belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others by the time I finish this song?)

I'm not suggesting that it's a bad thing to notice differences—it's a good thing, a necessary skill to organize the chaos of the world and to determine danger. And, we must be aware that when we notice differences in people, it can lead to "us and them." We evaluate others to see if they are part of our "tribe" or not, and we are good at naming those who don't belong.

Haidt writes that one of the hardest problems humans face is how to develop "cooperation without kinship." How do we develop positive feelings towards others who are not related to us by blood—-who are different?

His solution is that we can draw on the part of our human nature that knows we are connected. He suggests that each of us is a combination of chimp and bee; we're about 90% chimp—interested only in ourselves, and 10% bee—interested in the common good. His research has found that humans are conditionally hive creatures, bees—we can transcend our self-interest and connect to community. It isn't where we go first, and it happens under certain circumstances. Haidt identifies some triggers that help us switch from chimps to bees: things like peak experiences, proximity, moving or singing together, awe in nature, and events such as rallies, rock concerts and worship. While working for the common good is not our go-to state, it's where much of our most important work gets done, and it is certainly where the work of inclusion happens.

Biology teaches us that differences are not only good, but they are also necessary. A healthy ecosystem has incredible diversity, which scientists fear we are losing as we develop food systems dependent on just a few crops, and as we lose species to extinction due to habitat loss and climate change. History, like the potato famine in Ireland, showed us that monocultures are brittle and fragile.

In nature, diversity is a sign of a healthy ecosystem, a sign of resilience, a sign of life. Celebrating differences is celebrating life.

So, perhaps the next step in our path to celebrating differences is to understand who we are as humans, and develop our hive instincts, the part of us that recognizes the importance of the common good. Our tendency to elevate the individual is always there, it's very much part of our American culture. The common good is where we can become curious about differences and discover the power and strength of diversity. It's focus on the collective that helps us find common ground across differences, helps us not only become more connected, but also more resilient.

We are different and we are one.

### Reflection Three

When we met to discuss this sermon, Atley and Sheila told me about the deep sadness they experienced with their friends; that there were topics they couldn't not speak about, including current events. When religion or politics came up, they quickly changed the topic, as if it was an unspoken rule to avoid the things they disagree about. They mourned that they don't feel as close with these friends as they would like to, and how they can't be fully who they are with those friends. Atley and Sheila's sadness was based on the loss of a dream for deeper connection with people they loved.

It is a normal thing to want to be comfortable and at ease with others, and it's easiest to do that with people who are like us. And we live in a world where everyone is not like us. In order to bridge differences, we must exercise some tools for building bridges, tools like listening, deep listening that sets our own opinions and preferences on the back burner. Humility, the awareness that there are perspectives and experiences other than our own worth considering, and that we don't have the whole truth. There are covenants, negotiated agreements about how we will be together. We work hard to keep covenants, we break them, and we begin again in love. All of these help build a bigger gate so that everyone can fit through.

While the sadness that Atley and Sheila experience is not because of oppression but a different kind of disconnection, I wonder if it can help them, and us, relate to the grief underneath the anger of Baldwin and others who are oppressed. Those who are told that they cannot be their full and true selves and be loved; people of color and Indigenous, those who are gay, trans, non-binary, those with disabilities, those who are neurodiverse. We heard the grief of oppression in the Hebrew Slave Chorus: Oh, my country so beautiful and lost! Oh, so dear yet unhappy!

This song of lamentation reflects the grief and longing of people enslaved due to tribalism, trapped by the very worst of "us and them." It's the same tribalism used to justify any enslavement, supremacy of any kind, the

most extreme assertion of “oneness” which equates being one with being the same. That requirement for uniformity is oppression for those who are different.

It’s the kind of tribalism we see in our country and around the world today: an assertion that we are one and being one means being the same. “Different” is punished, silenced. It’s the pull of authoritarian promises of stability and comfort. And we know from history and the current political landscape that authoritarian means a concentration of power for some and oppression for many.

Sometimes there are opinions and beliefs that lead to actions, laws, systems, and cultures that are unjust and oppressive to others. Those we don’t want to let through the gate; we have to deal with them in a different manner.

At the societal level, movements to counter oppression not only recognize differences, accept them, and even celebrate them. Anti-oppression work goes beyond that to define the boundaries of what actions can be taken based on difference. In other words, anti-oppression work asserts that there are actions based on differences that are unjust, and that, because we are all connected, those unjust actions cannot be forced upon others by individuals who hold those beliefs. The common good requires that some individual actions are limited. We can believe what we want and there are boundaries on our actions whenever we are in community.

A recent example is our collective response to Covid; mask and vaccine mandates were put in place to protect everyone, and some people said it infringed on their rights, beliefs and values. Those people had the right to express those opinions and even challenge the mandates in the legal system. They did not have the right to defy the mandates because that put others in mortal danger. Sometimes the common good takes precedence over the individual; not always, but sometimes.

Baldwin’s words define another limit: We can be different and love each other unless your right to be different challenges my right to exist. All of this isms—racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism—define a boundary that must not be bridged; we don’t want to build a gate big enough to let hate in.

As individuals, we also have limits, behaviors that cross the line of what we consider moral and ethical, actions in conflict with our deepest held values. It is the work we do in a faith community that helps us define our values and beliefs, our boundaries, and how we live into them.

Sometimes when our boundaries are crossed, distance and separation is the healthiest thing for our own wellbeing. And sometimes staying connected and relating across the divide is the best course. We decide how big our gate is, and we can notice our response when we are invited to make it even bigger: do we want to accept that invitation?

Our path to celebrating our differences begins with recognizing and accepting that we are different, not erasing or minimizing differences. It is a process of understanding ourselves as humans and elevating the common good, at times over the individual. And it is a continual conversation about promises and compromises approached with humility and grounded in love.

The work of pluralism is not easy and never has been easy. Bridging differences asks us to be uncomfortable and courageous; it asks us to sacrifice and be humble. It's the sacred work of building a beloved community, the sacred work of justice.

We are different and we are one. That is worthy of celebration.

Let's be in silence together.