



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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The River Is Wide (part 1)

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“Freedom, Reason, Tolerance”. So read the sign outside of the UU Fellowship of my youth in Odessa, TX. It faced one of the busiest streets in town and I thought its message and its indiscreet placement were the most radical thing in that conservative Christian enclave. It made me proud to be UU. It was offering three things I was not accustomed to finding in Odessa: freedom to express my thoughts and to religious exploration, the celebration and not stifling of science and reason, and a place where differences would be tolerated.

As I grew into adulthood, tolerance sounded less and less appealing. Those who are tolerated do not fully have a place. Sure, name-calling and the like are frowned upon with tolerance at work, but does that mean that tongues are being bitten? Maybe, maybe not. One who is tolerated is never certain.

As good liberals, we would like to think that we have moved beyond tolerance to acceptance. But have we, truly? It may be safe to say that many if not most or all of us would like to have greater ethnic diversity in our UU congregations. This church has grown in its diversity in the past several years, which is great. The People of Color group has worked to increase visibility of their presence within the congregation as well as create a more welcoming atmosphere in the church, overall. Neighborhood even set a goal last year of finding an intern minister of color and I am so pleased to have been given the opportunity to meet you all and spend this church year with you! When I first attended service here at Neighborhood, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the congregation is so diverse. But, when I say “so diverse”, I am not comparing the congregation to its surrounding community, but rather to the many other UU congregations I have attended and visited and to UUism as a whole. By and large, ours is still a predominantly a White denomination and Neighborhood is predominantly a White church. If we are accepting, why is this the case? Why are we not more diverse?

In order to answer these difficult questions, we must first ask some even more difficult ones: *Why* do we want to have more diversity in our congregations? *How* do we go about achieving this goal? And, *what* will our congregations look like and *be* like when the goal is achieved? (In other words, how will we measure our success?)

The first question, “Why do we want diversity?”, questions our motive. Who will benefit from diversity as a goal? Does increasing the number of people of color in the congregation address why, historically, UUism has been a predominantly White church? Will these new members feel accepted or merely tolerated? Acceptance is a tough place to come to. It requires intentionality and deep soul work to become a reality. We do not simply become accepting because we *wish* ourselves to be or because we *believe* ourselves to be. Because we are all taught racism, to varying degrees, (either by our families of origin and/or by our society that values as the norm European influence and culture and Whiteness as the standard of beauty and intelligence) it takes deliberate time and energy to unlearn all that we have been taught, much of which has been buried deep in our wiring, where we keep the uglier parts of ourselves. We don’t usually expose these parts to the light of day for fear of judgment by ourselves & by others. Without taking the risk and doing this work in faithful community, an increase of diversity will be a façade. We may gain the *appearance* of an accepting congregation but we will, in essence, be merely tolerant of ethnic and cultural difference.

To solve this dilemma, we must begin to answer the second question, “How do we go about achieving the goal of diversity?” The answer *must* begin by stating that diversity, in and of itself, cannot be the ultimate goal absent from working toward ending oppression. **We have a spiritual imperative to end racism.** Doing this work helps us to grow more fully into our humanity. It recognizes the worth and dignity of every person and embraces our interconnectedness. Anti-racism and anti-oppression work requires us to look directly at ourselves and at others and do away with rhetoric which values “colorblindness” and ignoring difference. Joo Young Choi, a lifelong UU and friend I met through DRUUMM, a UU people of color organization, once addressed a 2005 UU youth conference with the following,

“Friend, if you wish to love me, do not be blind to my color, my sexuality, my abilities, my class. If you wish to love me, do not be blind to systemic oppression, and do not be blind to the oppression that has affected me. My color is beautiful.

The oppression must be identified, if we wish to destroy it. And if you do not see the systems that tried to break me down, you will never see my soul that has soared so high. Friend, don't you see it? My soul has grown strong throughout the struggles, and if you do not see any of this, Friend, you will never know me. And if you do not know me, Friend, you cannot love me.”

There are several ways to begin to get to know each other and ourselves in this way. Some congregations have hired consultants from the UUA or from other organizations to lead weekend workshops or will engage in the *Building the World We Dream About* curriculum, in the same way that the *Welcoming Congregation* curriculum assists congregations in becoming more welcoming to LGBTQ people. The People of Color group at Neighborhood will continue the conversation here by holding a documentary screening on March 28th. Also, the L.A. area will be hosting two conferences March 19th-21st. DRUUMM will meet in Pasadena and A.R.E., or Allies for Racial Equity, will meet in Long Beach. Registration is still open for both conferences.

These are only some ways to begin this crucial work. Another is to increase our awareness of culture and difference, to become more mindful. I have a funny story about this from seminary: we were placing our snacks out before a Student Senate meeting when my friend, Dominique, a black woman, and I began teasing two of our white friends, Margaret and Jessica, about their dish. They had brought hummus and baby carrots. We pointed out the fact that at every meeting there was always sure to be a white girl who brought baby carrots and hummus. After the four of us had a good laugh, Margaret and Jessica gained an awareness of the reality and *existence* of white culture and planned a seminary chapel service that explored it further, calling it the “White Girls Chapel Service”. It brought mindfulness and opened the eyes of all who attended. Again, there are many ways to explore how we have come to understand each other and ourselves and to help in ending racism and oppression.

The answer to the second question of, “How do we go about achieving the goal of diversity?” *began* in anti-racism/anti-oppression but it must *end* in working toward multiculturalism, for diversity on its own is not sustainable without multiculturalism and multiculturalism cannot be built without the foundation of anti-racism. This, in turn, begins to answer the third question, “What will our congregations look like? How will we measure our success?”. A few weeks ago, the ethnically diverse group “Build An Ark” played during our Sunday service. Jim leaned over to me and said, “Wouldn't it be great if our congregations looked like that?” I could not agree more! To get there, we will need to change. Change can be a scary thing. But, if our church culture changes to more fully embrace multiculturalism, we need not change our core values, which is what makes us Unitarian Universalists. We will not throw out all of the great old hymns or traditions, we will simply add to our repertoire. True multiculturalism does not recognize one culture as normative over any other, but it *does* embrace each as a rich and valuable member of the human family.

My call to ministry and to the service of the Unitarian Universalist faith is firmly rooted in my belief that someday, with firm conviction, I can say that we stand for “Freedom, Reason, and Acceptance!” For, as the song sings, “we are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know within. And we'll get there, heaven knows when we will get there, but we know we will!”