

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Can a New England Rooted Tradition Have Universal Appeal?”
Rev. Samuel Trumbore October 17, 2010

Call to Celebration

We begin with these powerful words by James Baldwin from the Preface of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*:

I do not remember, will never remember, how I howled and screamed the first time my mother was carried away from me. My mother was the only human being in the world. The *only* human being: everyone else existed by her permission.

Yet, what the memory repudiates controls the human being. What one does not remember dictates who one loves or fails to love. What one does not remember dictates, actually, whether one plays poker, pool or chess. What one does not remember contains the key to one's tantrums and one's poise. What one does not remember is the serpent in the garden of one's dreams. What one does not remember is the key to one's performance in the toilet or in bed. What one does not remember contains the only hope, danger, trap, inexorability, of love — only love can help you recognize what you do not remember. And memory makes its only real appearance in this life as this life is ending — appearing, at last, as a kind of guide into a condition which is as far beyond memory as it is beyond imagination...no one wishes to be plunged, head down, into the torrent of what he does not remember and does not wish to remember. It has something to do with the fact that we all came here as candidates for the slaughter of the innocents. It has something to do with the fact that all survivors, however they accommodate or fail to remember it, bear the inexorable guilt of the survivor. It has something to do, in my own case, with having once been a Black child in a White country.

My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness.

Sermon

Multiculturalism has weighed heavily on Unitarian Universalist hearts and minds since we committed ourselves to it at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in 1992. It may have been a key deciding factor in Bill Sinkford's election to the UUA Presidency in 2001. It was most certainly critical to Peter Morales' campaign and election as our current UUA President.

In that campaign, over and over again, Morales reminded us that in the not too distant future, more than 50% of the US population will no longer be of exclusively European ancestry. As Unitarian Universalists today are predominantly people of European ancestry, Morales warns us, unless we address and remove racial and cultural barriers, our numbers will probably decline. As a proportion of the US population, this decline is already happening with the greatest decline in New England. He challenges us to respond to these institutional threats. Today, I'd like to consider whether or not we should ... or even can.

UU theologian, the Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, spoke on this theme in his [Berry Street Essay](#) to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association in Salt Lake City, in 2009, right before Morales' election. His talk and the response by the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, minister of third Universalist in New York City, were summarized and reprinted in the spring issue of the UU World. ("[Can Unitarian Universalism Change](#)" and "[We Must Change](#)")

In the Berry Street Essay, Rasor did a detailed analytical study of the demographic changes in our congregations, ministers and seminarians over the last few decades. The numbers didn't move me – Rev. McNatt did. She spoke about her son Allen. Allen asked her if she would be upset if he didn't continue being Unitarian Universalist as an adult. She asked why he would want to leave us. He responded that it wasn't that he didn't like our values and principles, he did. But he was tired of being the only person of African descent in his classes and in the congregations she had served. He didn't want to stick out, he wanted to blend in. His mother felt the angst of her life work of UU ministry colliding with her son's wishes.

In the summer issue of the UU World, [there were responses](#) to Rasor's and McNatt's articles. If you go to the UU World web site, you can read people's responses to the responses. I'd like to share with you a little of those responses because it sets the stage for my reflections on the multicultural dilemma.

[James Kubal-Komoto](#) points out that there are six key characteristics of Unitarian Universalist culture that profoundly shape us:

1. Education: We have the highest average level of education of any religious tradition, with many of us having graduate degrees.
2. Class: Because of our education, we are predominantly members of the professional middle class.
3. Occupation: We predominantly have jobs that are not related to for-profit activity, which is highly correlated with political liberalism.
4. Ethnicity: We are not only predominantly white, but have predominantly northern European roots.

5. Age: We are predominantly middle-aged and older.

6. Gender: We are predominantly female.

I think he nails our struggle with diversity in this illustration:

If you are a 50-year-old woman with Scandinavian roots who has a master's degree, works as a social worker, and voted for Barack Obama, you'll probably feel very comfortable in most UU congregations. If you are a 25-year-old man with Italian roots who has an associate's degree, works in sales, and voted for John McCain, you may feel slightly out of place, even if the Belief-O-Matic [quiz on beliefnet.com] says you are 100 percent Unitarian Universalist. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways—from the bumper stickers in the parking lot to what is mentioned during “Candles of Joy and Sorrow” to the casual conversation during social hour—you may even get the message, “You don't belong here.”

The Rev. Marilyn Sewell emerita minister from Portland, Oregon, takes a different tack to our diversity problem, saying, stop flagellating ourselves! [She writes](#):

Unitarian Universalists should be commended for wanting to create churches where culture and class don't separate and divide. But it does a disservice to all when well-meaning progressives underestimate the very real obstacles we are up against. We're very long on the “should” and very short on the “how.”

... *UU World* asks, “Can We Change?” Before we answer that question, we need to answer several others: What accounts for our inability to move toward cultural diversity, in spite of our sincere efforts? What specific behavioral and institutional changes are we speaking of and how would we bring these changes about? How do class issues impact Unitarian Universalist efforts to become culturally diverse? What is unique about UU history and tradition, and how much of this do we wish to retain?

[The last response](#) I'll mention is from Offie Wortham, a woman of African descent, but not ethnocentricly African. She points out we have a distinct, elitist culture that prides itself in certain types of literature, reading, foods, etiquette, vacations, speech, dance, NPR and classical music. She should know it well being a 50 year member of her UU congregation. She says, only because she is not ethnocentric does she feel comfortable as a UU. She calls herself a transcultural person, a rare bird in our society. She writes:

Even if more people of color knew something about the UU philosophy and culture there is little reason to believe that they would reject their present belief system or lifestyle to assimilate into this rarefied way of life. Why should they? Look what most would have to give up: Their ethnocentrism, music, speech and mannerisms, style of dress when attending a service, the highly emotional, entertaining, and theatrical

sermons, their favorite foods, their humor, name recognition, and most of all, their friends and relatives...Eventually, people will see and appreciate our commitment and concern. Maybe then some will come, to learn more about these good people. We must always remember: Is our goal to help people or to make ourselves feel better?

Are you starting to get a taste of how challenging this is? Is it any wonder religious organizations have such cultural uniformity? Even the Catholics, the most diverse worldwide church by far struggles to blend ethnocentric urban churches together. The only churches that seem to be successful at diversity are the mega churches but they impose theological conformity on their members as well as Protestant conservative white culture.

So why are we beating our head against this wall? It all goes back to the time of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's. The newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961 quickly found Civil Rights as a unifier for our congregations to fight for desegregation of the schools, voting rights and employment opportunities through affirmative action. Suddenly, people of African descent were streaming into our congregations. Sadly, the UUA made promises that were not kept primarily due to UUA fiscal mismanagement. There was a confrontation and blow up at the 1969 General Assembly in Boston that led to a massive walkout. People of African descent began streaming out of our congregations. The leaders of the UUA have been licking this institutional wound ever since. We made that wound policy with a [resolution in 1992](#) that said, in part:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates of the 1992 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, affirm and support this vision of a racially diverse and multicultural Unitarian Universalism

Before I look at what resources we might bring to this task, we need to grapple with some of the huge barriers we've been trying to climb over. I'd like to briefly name three problems that are really tough: the whiteness problem, the cultural bias problem, and the trust problem.

The Rev. Thandeka has insightfully [pointed us toward the invisible normative whiteness](#) that makes all non-whites "other." Thandeka challenges people to use the term white as an adjective to describe any reference to a person of European descent. "I'm going over to visit my white friend." "I need to talk to my white supervisor about that." "How many white people will be coming to our party?" Another exercise to sensitize us to the invisibility of white privilege is considering the invisible [knapsack of privilege](#) white people carry on their backs developed by Peggy McIntosh. When I walk into a store, I'm not suspected of terrorism or thievery just because of the way I look. When I talk to a realtor, my skin color will not be an issue as I consider where to live. When I jog in a respectable neighborhood, I will not worry about the police stopping me.

Whiteness and having a knapsack of privilege is normative in our congregations. Being aware of this and how it operates is a critical step toward becoming more welcoming of diversity in our midst.

The cultural bias issue is another challenging problem. People want to feel comfortable in their religious home. If that doesn't happen right away for visitors, our values and mission have to be appealing enough to overcome any initial discomfort.

It takes only a short amount of time to look around and size up the place and decide if I belong. There is a great diversity game that helps people understand how that happens. Everyone gets a card but they aren't allowed to look at it. They asked to put it on their forehead and then silently try to find one of three groups, the low cards, the face cards, and the middle cards. Usually in about three minutes people sort themselves out successfully without learning what their card is by watching who approaches who. Visitors to our congregations are looking at the cards on our foreheads and asking this question – where do I rank in comparison to these people?

The last problem I'll mention is the trust problem. Robert D. Putnam who wrote *Bowling Alone*, decided to study multiculturalism. After studying the problem for a number of years reported [in 2007](#) some troubling conclusions. In the short run, immigration and ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity and social capital...in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, residents of all races tend to 'hunker down.' Trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer.

The good news is in the long term, this trend can be effectively reversed with beneficial results. We saw videos two weeks ago of UU congregations where diversity is happening, How do we get there? Putnam thinks “the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of ‘we’.”

How do we create a broader sense of we? First and foremost, we must hold the intention of that 1992 resolution against all failure and setback. Just knowing the work is very difficult and we'll make lots of mistakes helps us loosen up and be more forgiving and generous to each other in the process of moving forward. We must keep faith that the direction we're going is worth the effort without punishing ourselves if the speed of our progress doesn't meet grand expectations. This is hard work. Let us celebrate our willingness to do it at all.

We must remember what we seek is an expansion of our identity not a contraction or a self-denial. We need not give up our organic foods and love of PBS, NPR and the symphony. There isn't a shortage of great musicians and inspired writers from around the world.

What we need to do is to open our minds and open our ears and follow Offie Wortham in becoming transcultural. We are called by this resolution to get bigger, not smaller, to be more inclusive and less exclusive.

Razor reminds us of the assets we bring to the task, theological pluralism and intentional engagement with modern culture. We are willing to go to contemporary sources of literature and poetry, to new inspired prophets offering new revelation, to find the eternal message the runs through all the great religious traditions. This openness helps us be welcoming and affirming.

In my lifetime, I've seen so much movement on the diversity front. Women are now over 50% of our clergy. Sexual orientation is no longer a barrier to ministerial settlement. The diversity in our ministry continues to increase. Our willingness to embrace theological diversity continues to increase. It's not either/or, it is both/and.

I'd say the most critical factor for success in becoming more multicultural is widening and deepening our relationships. When we cross boundaries, visit each other's homes, care for each other's children, go to social events together and get to know each other human to human, the categories fall down and we connect heart to heart. In the crucible of our common humanity, we forge the bonds that hold us together despite differences.

Two weeks ago I said the barriers to greater diversity are primarily emotional. One of the best ways to grow our appreciation and overcome our fears is through personal relationships. Our non-authoritarian approach to religion can create an ideal egalitarian climate for us to meet each other, develop trusting relationships and learn how to love each other and appreciate each other better.

So my message to you today is, be both patient and impatient. We will become more multicultural and we will need to keep working at it to make it happen. We've made a huge institutional commitment to this work and it is gradually unfolding. We've already seen some of the fruit in our lifetime. Not that there will not be problems, hurt feelings and misunderstandings. To be human is to have problems.

But figuring out how to live together in peace with our differences is great, meaningful work for us to be doing together in community.