

The Rainbow, Not the Monochrome

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 20, 2022

The young child from our Story for All Ages offered us a nugget of wisdom: “I just put the person together, and the whole world fell into place.”¹ When each person is accepted, radically welcomed, and treated with inherent worth, they are “put together” – they are whole. And when each person is whole, the world becomes a beautiful, sacred place – the world heals as each person heals. This reminds me of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s goal of beloved community, where love and justice prevail, when each person’s identity is seen as equal, and every person is included. Is this not the goal of Unitarian Universalism? Is this not inherent in drawing our circle wide?

Historically, people thought in terms of insular villages as a form of survival. In our current day and age, this ancient form of protection serves to feed into the opposite. It chips away at survival, it creates a culture of “otherness,” of societies riddled with prejudice and hate and fear. Student of Buddhism Joanna Macy articulates that to overcome these engrained problems that feed racism and every form “ism” is with “universal responsibility.” It is up to each and every one of us to take responsibility, to engage in regular practices of “love and kindness,”² to offer genuine concern for those beyond the comfortable, insular circles we often find ourselves in.

I think of my own work in widening my own circle – leaving the suburbs as a seminary student to work in an inner city at the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless. Or years previous, leaving my immediate family who identified as atheist to enter a Unitarian Universalist faith community. Later, expanding beyond that faith community to experience and draw wisdom from other faith communities. And yet it would be self-defeating to view this as leaving my

¹ traditional Jewish tale, adapted by Rev. Gretchen Haley

² From *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2022*

safety net to explore some “other,” but instead to understand these experiences as having the privilege of garnering wisdom from those I would not have met had I not been intentional about inviting them into my own life. From the Elizabeth Coalition I brought a new understanding of strength amidst oppression. From Unitarian Universalism I brought an understanding of Universal salvation and inherent worth. From visiting a mosque, I garnered a new appreciation for the power of love in the face of oppression. With each experience I grew from that which was previously unknown – through each experience I fostered proximity and relationships.

Last week, Ostara guided you through spiritual practices of prayer and meditation that serve as a catalyst towards bringing radical love and kindness to the world around you. This is where our inward work begins as a people of faith. Once spiritually centered and grounded, we can begin that difficult work of realizing our own prejudices, an ugliness we each carry within us. Whether taught to us explicitly or implicitly, we carry biases within us. Surrounded by news stories that portray the mentally ill as dangerous, or the disabled as helpless, or of poor blacks or Latinos as dangerous or as needing the aid of white saviors. When we do this inward work, we can begin to understand and realize our own racist thoughts, our own prejudice thoughts, created by the society we live in, the history of our nation filled with white bodies who murdered indigenous bodies and stole their land. Of white bodies who abducted Africans for forced labor. Our society is structured around these facts. We can see that we are steeped in a society of white supremacy culture, of systemic racism that favors those who are white. We are surrounded by a white, able bodied, heterosexual, middle class, male norm. Unitarian Universalist minister Jabari S. Jones articulates that part of the privilege of those of us who are white is our ability, if we chose to do so, to claim ignorance to the facts of our history and our culture, and live with a sense of amnesia. Those of us with layers of privilege need an antidote to the attitude to ignoring that which does not seemingly affect us.³

³ From *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2022*

I want to take a moment to lift up the voice of a descendent of a slave, a Unitarian Universalist minister, as she responds to this history in her own life. Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore writes,

May what we know of suffering, redemption, and salvation bring us to Love.

Having been the *other*, may our hearts exclude no one.

Having been the slave, may we long to be no one's master.⁴

She uses her experiences and her history and her ancestors not to foster hate but love. We have each experienced being on the outside of a circle, some with this history of slavery and racism and some without. Can we use our experiences of exclusion to foster a culture of inclusion and love and acceptance? Earlier this month, Sheri shared with us how her faith in Unitarian Universalism led her to advocacy work as she widened the circle to those with disabilities, whether mental or physical. Those who face any form of disability so often populate the margins. Through her own story and her own experiences, she widened the circle here, at our church.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is engrained with teachings of widening the circle. Our Universalist history sees each person as good, whole, and forgivable; each person will be saved whatever "saved" means to each and every one of us – this is the theology of universal salvation. Even if we cannot find it within ourselves to forgive or love a person, this understanding of the holy, this understanding of a divine being, of God, can. This widens the circle of concern indefinitely, and serves as a catalyst to our first principle, affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of each person. This means the prisoner. The downtrodden. The ill. I find strength in the teachings of Jesus and his work with the least of these. I find meaning in the theology of God – or any form of the sacred – in the marginalized.

My husband and I recently took a walk around the Baltimore harbor – it's one of our favorite things to do. Mid-walk, we encountered a man who was seemingly unhoused asking us for

⁴ *Voices from the Margins* "Having Been the Other" by Natalie Fenimore

money. We had nothing to offer, and he left. As I watched his body shrinking into the distance, I thought, what if that were the sacred in human form? Would that have changed my reaction? I wonder how each of our actions would alter if we understood our God – a being of no names, and of many names – present and active in each and every person we encounter. No longer seen as an “other,” but as sacred, as divine. In Unitarian Universalism, we all come from a common source, although we may not all agree on what that is. I call it love. In Unitarian Universalism, we all end at the same source, which to me is another realm. To our Universalist forebears, this was heaven. We come from love, we live our lives, we share the same fate after death, whatever that may be. I can think of no stronger bond than common source and common destiny. In that precious time we share in this realm, let us see the holy in everyone.

I think, too, of our interdependent web. What affects one affects us all. One tug on the web and we all feel it. Those of us with privilege can claim ignorance, but our lives and our fates are intimately connected with everyone in our midst. Activist Lilla Watson writes, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”⁵

And yet, in reflecting on our faith, we must acknowledge that lack of diversity within our church communities. We remain insular in our largely white, upper middle class, highly educated identities. We have so much to offer, and we have so much to learn, and to do this we must draw our circles wide. Unitarian Universalist minister John T. Crestwell reflects that what will save our faith is building relationships. Is seeing God in every person, place, and thing. We can save our faith if we foster a desire to learn, and a desire to grow.⁶ To truly acknowledge the common destiny of all humanity. It depends on proximity, relationship, and genuine compassion. It depends on a willingness to be uncomfortable, to sit with that uncomfortable acknowledgment of layers of privilege. It depends on radical love and profound welcome.

⁵ From *Soul Matters Worship Packet February 2022*

⁶ *Voices from the Margins* “Saving Unitarian Universalism” John T. Crestwell

This plays into justice work. Justice work demands proximity – an intersection of identities as we work to promote health and well-being for all. This is that necessary work to create Beloved Community, this is the aspiration of our proposed 8th Principle. We are called to work together, our liberation dependent on the well-being of the other. And justice work grows beyond this. When each person is whole, they can share their gifts, and we can be in a place to receive those gifts, and our persons are put together and “the whole world falls into place.”

When we open our circle, we experience the beauty of different forms of art and dance and music – not just in museums but through relationships, by getting to know people. I sang songs with the Sufis – a visitor at the most effervescent and musical worship experience I have ever participated in – learning new ways of incorporating music into spirituality. We gain strength from tales of survival and perseverance from each other – inspiration for our own lives. From my work at the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless, I still carry with me gifts I received – tangible gifts of notebooks filled with scripture as those I worked with shared their faith journeys with me, and gifts that I simply hold in my heart of strength and compassion that guide me in all my days and serve as a part of my ministry. We hear of morals and ancient teachings through the craft of storytelling – learning to care for the stranger through the parable of the Good Samaritan or learning to center ourselves in love through practices of Buddhist loving kindness meditation. We all learn and grow and benefit from this flower garden of humanity. Unitarian Universalist Leslie Takahashi writes, “the rainbow world is more gorgeous than the monochrome.”⁷ We each have something to offer, and we each have a void waiting to be filled with the wisdom of others.

During seminary I served as a chaplain at a university hospital in New Jersey. There, I learned many lessons, but today, I focus on one. Caring for others, learning from others - it’s not about trying to make people become us, but to understand them for who they are. Doing that work of helping people and loving unconditionally, this is not about imposing our beliefs. One experience that stands out in my mind was trying to help a suffering woman who thought she

⁷ *Voices from the Margins* “Marginal Wisdom” by Leslie Takahashi

was being punished by God. I wanted to impose my own faith beliefs on her – my understanding of my holy wouldn't punish anyone! But my advisor gently reminded me that my role was to compassionately guide her along her own faith journey, no matter what that may be. My role of a loving presence was not to persuade her to explore my beliefs, but to use the love and compassion I found within my own faith to guide her in exploring hers.

Let us draw our circles wide. Let us cast our stones into the pool and watch the ripples flow in concentric circles, including every being in their midst. I invite you to learn and grow from those you may not regularly encounter, seeking relationship and reciprocal care. Let us see the holy in everyone as we traverse from our common source to our common end. "Having been the other, may our hearts exclude no one."⁸ I invite us to end with the loving kindness meditation Ostara began our journey with. May we lift up in our minds an image or understanding of all beings who inhabit this planet and offer them our prayers.

May all beings be safe

May all beings be happy

May all beings be tranquil.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸ *Voices from the Margins* "Having Been the Other" by Natalie Fenimore