

## **Less Beautiful Without You**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 5, 2024**

I spent a summer working as a chaplain at a university hospital in New Jersey. It was my sacred duty to tend to the sick, the broken, the terrified, the dying. As such, each morning I prepared for the day ahead, settling in the hospital's interfaith chapel, head bowed humbly before the empty pulpit and stained-glass windows, praying to be a conduit for all that is sacred and holy to these patients I would serve. I have a specific memory to share with you, after one of those morning meditations – that of a devastated woman who had tragically lost her son, brought to the hospital for entirely unrelated medical issues. It is a memory I share with enough ambiguity to mask any identity of the patient. In our first conversation we spoke of theology and meaning making, and I was met with a deeply held challenge to my own faith – the woman's belief in divine punishment – that her son had died as a result of her own sins. Held firm in my own theology of a loving, compassionate God who tends to each of us in intimate ways, the idea of divine punishment felt to me as a theology that I should dismantle and replace with love. And yet, I learned, this suffering woman was making sense of her own devastating experiences and finding ways to simply survive. Ultimately, through my recurring visits with her, I learned intimate lessons of perseverance, strength, and a faith far stronger than my own. I realized my own initial downfall. I had drawn a circle around me – a circle of what I would accept from others. My circle included a loving, compassionate God, not welcoming or validating this woman's life-giving theology of divine punishment. In opening my circle to welcome her unique beliefs, I grew in faith, strength, compassion, and awe.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith May 2024

May this story guide us into today's mantra, pulled from the sentiments of Tess Baumberger: "This place would be less beautiful without you."<sup>1</sup> Different faiths, different experiences, different cultures, different identities or abilities, different – as I learned – theology, adds to the beauty, wonder, and awe of this world and this realm. Today we celebrate pluralism – racial inclusion. We are all sacred beings, unique in a plethora of life-giving ways. Pluralism is not simply acceptance or diversity – it is a true, genuine, unabashed celebration of every single blessed identity.

There is a difference between diversity and inclusion, or pluralism. Diversity is simply not enough. Author Verna Myers phrases it this way: "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion, [pluralism], is being asked to dance."<sup>2</sup> How can we articulate this dichotomy? Diversity can be understood as more simplistic, "We accept, we tolerate, we welcome, we invite." It allows people in yet lacks true authenticity and wonder and an opportunity for questioning and growth. Pluralism is about celebrating all of whom the other person is, engaging and learning and rejoicing in just who they are and the beauty they bring. It is a dance, an unscripted song, a wonder, and a beauty. May we pray together and sing together and laugh together and learn together and grow together, may we share varied food and art and wisdom and faith and experiences and history and meaning making, each of us enriching the other.

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<sup>1</sup> "Less Beautiful without You" by Tess Baumberger

<sup>2</sup> Diversity is Being Invited to the Party: Inclusion is Being Asked to Dance" presentation by Verna Myers

How can we grow from the unique beauty of this interdependent world? How can we foster wonder and awe and celebration? First, as I learned in that hospital in New Jersey, we need to draw our circles wide. We welcome that which even feels counterintuitive to our own beliefs and worldviews and meaning making. How did I, for example, personally welcome theism into my atheistic theology? In full disclosure, I was quite averse to religion as a young person. Yet I entered a new world when I entered a church, curious of spirituality. Through the faith of Unitarian Universalists and furthermore from the theologies taught at seminary – from other’s insights and meaning making that were counterintuitive to me at the time – A loving God, a compassionate God, a God who persuades us towards good in this often broken world, this began to give me more purpose and meaning making and sense of self than atheism ever personally offered, a journey I was not expecting to traverse. My life and my faith blossomed and flourished because of this intention to learn and grow from the faith, theologies, and views of myriad others, that at the time were novel and seemingly implausible – widening my circle and as such changing my life. I have grown in purpose, strength, wonder, and meaning making, all from a pluralism that allowed me not only to include other beliefs but to embody what I learned.

And while thus far we have framed pluralism in awe and wonder and beauty, pluralism is not always easy, in fact it can often be quite hard. It is, as author Mick Cooper reflects, “a constant willingness to self-challenge.” It is an acknowledgement that we may often be “wrong or

limited”<sup>3</sup> – in politics or judgements or faith. It invites us to question ourselves and our actions and welcome doubt and introspection. Through curiosity we are invited to reflect upon where our actions and ideologies may be morally or theologically or practically incorrect or mistaken. We are called to detach ourselves from what we are familiar with, our own beliefs, our own agendas or commitments – acknowledging that we are inherently limited in wisdom and in knowledge. Pluralism becomes a vulnerability, a frightening prospect, an invitation to self-doubt and deep questioning as we learn and grow from the experiences of others. It is a vulnerability we need each traverse to separate ourselves from a siloed life of judgment, isolation, and stereotypes. What can inclusion, pluralism, wondering questions, and respect for other experiences offer? Through personal interactions we learn from the trials, tribulations, and experiences of myriad beings, offering new insights, truths, wisdom, and knowledge that we could never acquire on our own. We could, for example, learn about the detrimental effects of racism, or the plight of transgender people, opening our eyes to the full humanity and strength and perseverance and wonder of those who are marginalized, simultaneously acknowledging and comprehending the inherent privilege many of us benefit from.

Zen teacher angel Kyodo williams offers this, “Inclusivity is not ‘how do we make you a part of what we are?’ but ‘how do we become more of what you are?’”<sup>4</sup> Let us reflect on our ideas of welcome. Are we offering words of acceptance, and yet expecting a level of conformity or a transition to the status quo? Do we claim to respect differences, and yet stifle what makes each

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<sup>3</sup> “What is Pluralism?” by Mick Cooper

<sup>4</sup> From “Beloved Community: Healing What Separates Us”

being unique as we expect a level of assimilation? Perhaps an assimilation to language, clothes, gender norms, sexuality, theology, or other standards. We say, “you are welcome, as long as you become more of who we are; as long as the dominant culture remains unaffected and safe” This incomplete, disingenuous, superficial welcome fosters a culture of superiority and exclusivity, stripped of the beauty and wonders and richness and challenges of true pluralism. Our lives – our societies – are incomplete and narrow.

There are beautiful cultural differences to be celebrated, yes, including varying cultures within our own country. We pray to different entities, we sing differently and dance differently, we each have our own unique art, we each have deeply held traditions and faiths and origin stories. What a rich array of living! What an abundance of beauty and meaning making. And it is not simply culture. We have different ways of overcoming adversity, whether from disability, poverty, or race. We have each survived hardship. We each come with our own questions and hopes and joys and curiosities and inquiries. We have different theologies that give us life. Think of a world where all of this was celebrated, where we use this plethora of identities to learn and grow. What beauty – what richness. Each of us, worthy of respect and admiration just as we are. Each of us filled with insights, knowledge, and wisdom that can help others in our midst flourish and thrive while cultivating meaning and purpose. May we draw the circle wide.

So, yes, let us return to this idea of a circle. Mental illness, physical disability, race, ethnicity, gender identity, country of origin, faith – we have each had an experience of being told, “You

do not belong in this circle. You do not belong in this space.” Sometimes it is felt less poignantly than others; sometimes it is experienced each and every day. People face both aggressions and microaggressions – those small acts that chip away from one’s livelihood one comment, one assumption, one act at a time. Disregard can tear away at heart, soul, mind, and body. To some extent, we each know what it is like to feel unworthy, undeserving. My first question is this: Is that a pain we would like to intentionally inflict upon another by fostering our own exclusive practices? Sit with that for a minute. Furthermore, I invite us to reflect upon the poetry Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out-

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle and took him in!<sup>5</sup>

What happens if we meet hate, anger, animosity and judgment with curiosity and wonder? What if we partner with love, and nothing more? Is this in itself not a powerful way to become a catalyst for the growth and change of those who cause harm? To say, no matter what your ideologies, I accept your humanness. I will not shut you out. It does not make wrongdoing ok. It does not condone racism or sexism or ableism or say that we must love those who work to harm or minimize us. It is to say, even though you have excluded me, I will accept you as a person, and pray or hope that this acceptance changes your heart. May our own search for

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<sup>5</sup> “Outwitted” by Edwin Markham

universal inclusion, pluralism, and love be a catalyst to widen our circles more and more. To accept and welcome even those of whom we disagree with – even with those of whom shut us out. It becomes a livelihood of love and strength – of telling the world and every individual in it, “you are a part of my circle. You cannot break me.”

I want to end with a reflection on the Black Elk reading we heard earlier. In part, Black Elk wrote, “I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”<sup>6</sup> We are all offspring of the same source, sheltered by the same parent of all creation, whether God, Goddess, or stardust. We are each a blessed, sacred, improbable being on this brief and transient earthly realm. All of our overlapping circles create one great hoop of inescapable interdependence of which we are each inevitably a part. And this – all of this – is holy. And this – all of this – is pluralism. So may our own circles be as wide as daylight and as starlight. May our lives be blessed with the wonder, awe, and beauty of true pluralism, as we know the wonders of genuine, universal siblinghood, all of one source. May love and curiosity guide us in each of our days, as we are both challenged and inspired by this profound inclusion. May our lives be made whole and rich and meaningful and wonderful and purposeful through acts of welcome, inclusivity, and love. May we dance together, may we sing together! As part of any faith, any

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<sup>6</sup> Writings by Black Elk, found in *Singing the Living Tradition*

race, any gender, any ability, may we each know, “This place would be less beautiful without you.”<sup>7</sup>

May it be so, and Amen

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<sup>7</sup> “Less Beautiful without You” by Tess Baumberger