

All Roads are Good
Sermon of September 22, 2013
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First Unitarian Church of Worcester

From the Hindu Tradition

There are hundreds of paths up the mountain,
 all leading in the same direction,
 so it doesn't matter which path you take.
 The only one wasting time is the one
 who runs around and around the mountain,
 telling everyone else that their path is wrong.

From One Light, Many Windows by the Rev. Forrest Church

In the Cathedral of the World there are millions of windows, each telling its own story of who we are, where we came from, where we are going, each illustrating life's meaning. Every religious, philosophical, even scientific worldview has a window, or many windows, through which the one Light shines, refracting Truth, bringing illumination to worshipers and seekers. . . . No one can see the one Light (Truth or God, call it what you will) directly, only as refracted through the cathedral windows. . . . This should counsel humility and mutual respect for those whose reflections on ultimate meaning differ from our own.

This metaphor is a perfect description of Unitarian Universalism. One Light shines through many windows, illuminating human minds and hearts in many different ways. In our congregations we honor this truth by encouraging our members to reflect on the Light through whatever set of windows they find most illuminating. We only require that this same freedom be honored for others. For this reason, this church and those like it are nothing less than little laboratories for the practice of *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one. . . (When) others disagree with your personal theology, short of changing your mind you have only four options. You can convert, destroy, ignore, or respect them. Fundamentalists of the Right usually attempt conversion. . . Fundamentalists of the Left tend to ignore such disagreements as irrelevant. . . . we embrace the fourth option: mutual respect. There is only one caveat to abridge such respect. We do not and must not permit stone throwing in the cathedral.

Sermon

Let me begin with a few words about the poster here in front of the pulpit and the exhibit from which the title *and* inspiration for this sermon comes. All Roads Are Good was shown at the National Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan in 1994. The poster depicts one of the largest exhibits – concentric circles of moccasins placed in pairs, each pair different from the rest with one moccasin slightly forward as if in the midst of a social dance at a pow wow. Collectively they represent the diversity of native cultures in the Americas. From the moment I saw it, this image drew me in - all those moccasins gathered together, circled

'round, in motion; different sizes, styles, beadwork; many realities and multiple viewpoints; a community where all roads are good and all converge when the community gathers.

20th century Unitarian theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams said that, "Church is where we get to practice what it means to be human." Unitarian Universalist public theologian the Rev. Forrest Church described Unitarian Universalist congregations as nothing less than laboratories for the practice of *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one. The image of the moccasins reminds me of this place, our practice—and what we have to offer our diverse human community, a community sharing a shrinking globe where, in Forrest Church's words, discrete backyards are a thing of the past. (Universalism: A Theology for the 21st Century p.11 UU World.org 05/01) *We know* about being a community where all roads are good, where all converge when the community gathers. *We know* about being many *and* being one. *We know* the obligation of respect, the necessity of engagement and the power of hospitality. In *our* laboratory, *this* is what we *practice*.

The obligation of respect.

"Many windows, one light. Many waters, one sea. All lifted hearts are free." These are the first words of a reflection on wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. Written by the Rev. Kendyll Gibbons as the text for "All Lifted Hearts" from the Sources Cantata, she gives voice to a diversity of teachings about how we should treat one another. (Sources of Our Faith pp. 55-57) As they sang "All Lifted Hearts" this morning, the choir, the flute and Will offered us a beautiful, powerful reminder of our obligation to respect one another.

The necessity of engagement.

You may have heard of Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority. Jerry and I are from the same home town. Some time ago, I spent six months participating in the church he founded. As I stood on the steps of the church one Sunday a young man approached. With a friendly handshake, he asked me a bit about myself, about what I believed. Several Sundays later, he approached me again; this time during the altar call. He invited me to come forward with him, confess my sins and accept Jesus as my Savior. I explained that, with Rev. Falwell's permission, I was there to learn about the church. I told him I was a member of a different church, a Unitarian church, and would not be responding to the altar call. We repeated this interaction several Sundays. I tried to engage this young man in conversation until I realized that his relationship with me was about *his* faith and fulfilling his responsibility to lead me to *the* truth. When faced with disagreements, an attempt at conversion, says Forrest Church, is a typical response of fundamentalism of the right.

There is also, says Church, a fundamentalism of the left that ignores disagreement, considering it irrelevant. As religious liberals, we risk a fundamentalism similar to that of the left. I think of it as a variation on "parallel play." Each of us is on our chosen path. We acknowledge others and the paths they travel. Side by side, we move along. Though in a richly diverse religious community; we remain most comfortable when our images, our words, our ways are referenced, spoken, used. Engaging the differences among us requires intention, and

at times hard work. Most of the time there *is room for everyone*. Sometimes we bump into one another. Occasionally we collide, as I did with a fellow UU in another congregation. I told him a bit about my Southern Baptist upbringing. He smiled and said, “Oh, don’t worry. You’ll get over that!” What I heard: In this church we put up with you until you get over it, whatever *IT* is. His assumptions combined with my astonishment made parallel play look like a good option. If only the conversation had taken a different turn. “Sounds like an interesting journey!” “What led you into UUism?” “What’s still important to you from your Baptist past?” In our laboratory, we need more opportunities to practice engagement, practice curiosity. We need to mitigate against the likelihood of “parallel play.” In a theologically diverse community, simply being in the same space is not sufficient.

The power of hospitality.

Why *do* we choose to join together rather than exercise our freedom to believe what we will in the privacy of our homes on Sunday mornings? Because experience has taught us this - *we need one another*. Forrest Church put it this way. We choose to gather here because we know how easily we slip back into mechanical habits that blunt our consciousness. We need and *know* we need to be reminded week in and week out how precious life is, how wondrous and magical, how truly miraculous. Not only for our own sake, but for the sake of our loved ones and neighbors as well.

We need one another. Yes *and*. . . in our laboratory for the practice of what it means to be many and one it gets complicated. Someone found a job, welcomed a child into the family. Someone else struggles with being unemployed, grieves the death of a loved one. Someone needs a silent moment to center themselves; the tumult and noise of the week have yet to subside. Someone else celebrates seeing a friend with an enthusiastic greeting, unable to wait any longer to share some good news.

Sometimes the complications are about identity - the ones you can check off on a form – race, gender, age, education, relationship status - and others – like sexual orientation, gender expression, and class status, cultural or ethnic heritage. Sometimes the complications arise out of our differing religious identities - Theist, Atheist, Agnostic, Humanist, Pagan, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and another much discussed these days –spiritual but not religious.

With all this and more here present in *our* laboratory, we need to practice hospitality *in a particular way*. Though a bit out of character for a Unitarian Universalist context, I suggest a rule. We know it implicitly and observe it often, maybe even most, of the time. Making this rule explicit matters. Here’s the story of the 70% rule.

The Rev. Dr. James Forbes, now Minister Emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City, knew well the diversity of identities and of spiritual hopes and needs making up that congregation on any given Sunday. I can imagine him in conversation with his god – seeking guidance on how to help build and sustain a community where, from time to time and sometimes often, individuals were faced with hope only partially realized or not at all, with a need only slightly satisfied or nearly ignored. Not to be satisfied by tolerance alone *AND* to strive for inclusion, Rev. Forbes suggested to his congregation - and knowing Unitarian

Universalism suggested once upon a time to me - we follow the 70% rule. On a *really good* Sunday, we each get about 70% of what we most deeply need. On an average Sunday, it will be more like 50%. That other 50% or so - we give it away to those whose needs are different from our own. *We give it away - an act of hospitality.* Maybe it's the sound of the choir, the beauty of the space, a moment in prayer, words in a sermon that touch the heart. It is enough. As for the rest, the things that don't speak to us -that's where someone else may find some of what they need. Exactly which 50ish % will be for us on any given Sunday we can't know in advance. Exactly which 50ish% we'll give away we can't plan for. "I'll take the choir's singing and you get a prayer and a reading." Hospitality of the spirit just doesn't work that way.

A community where all roads are good and all converge when the community gathers. A small part of a diverse human community on a shrinking globe where discrete back yards are a thing of the past. A church where we get to practice what it means to be human. A laboratory for the practice of "out of many, one."

May this be a place where we practice what we teach, sing, pray preach – the obligation of mutual respect with each encounter, the necessity of engagement across boundaries of difference, and the power of a generous hospitality of the spirit. May we offer these to our world.

May it be so.