

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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This past week our UU crew put in another appearance at the Disciples Kitchen here in Waynesboro. Our Fellowship has been participating in this program for a year now, and we've become fairly comfortable with what needs to be done. It certainly helps to have a core group of veterans led by our kitchen queen Laura Hiatt, whose experience in preparing meals for large groups makes it a lot easier for the rest of us. My usual role is that of **greeter**—the person who welcomes and then records the names of every person, young or old, who comes through the door. Some of them I recognize from previous lunches, but there are also the new ones. The last person to arrive just before closing time was a man named Ferencz, who explained to me in broken English that he was a refugee from the 1990s warfare in Bosnia. His wife had died from cancer recently, and he had fallen on hard economic times. As I struggled to listen to his story, it became increasingly clear that his spirit was even more broken than his English.

The people who appear at Disciples Kitchen are a motley group of disheveled souls—many of them unkempt in appearance, snaggle-toothed, sometimes incoherent. But some of them are also parents and grandparents with young children or other relatives in tow—struggling in their own way to make the best of difficult circumstances. When I began working as a greeter last March, these people made me feel very uncomfortable—uncomfortable with the life they lead **and** uncomfortable with the life that I lead in contrast to theirs. Over time, I have come to accept and respect and sometimes admire them as they try to find their way in a world that wished they would just disappear.

I have also come to admire the volunteers at the church who show up every day to guide both the clients and the folks like us who are trying to be helpful. Mary Strickler presides over Disciples Kitchen like a mother hen. She often sits beside me at the greeters table, welcoming both the regulars and the newcomers with the same down-to-earth good will. Even though she is approaching her 70th birthday, Mary shows no signs of giving up her role. If you can't figure something out, just ask Mary, and she will tell you what to do without making you feel stupid. That is a gift.

Every so often, we get glimpses of what the word “community” can mean, and Disciples Kitchen is one of those glimpses. In 2000 Robert Putnam published a book titled *Bowling Alone*, which documented dramatic declines in “involvement in civic associations, membership in churches and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and friends and neighbors, philanthropic giving, even simple trust in other people—as well as participation in . . . bowling leagues” that gave the book its title. [Robert D. Putnam & Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together*, p. 4] “Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures—and how we may reconnect. He warns that our stock of **social capital**—the very fabric of our connections with each other—has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities. . . . Community well-being simply has to do with the **quality of the relationships**, the cohesion that exists among its citizens. He calls this **social capital**.” [Peter Brock, *Community*, p. 17]

Robert Putnam's next book was titled *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, in which he offers examples of successful community-building efforts in a wide variety of settings. He also introduces an important new distinction in the quest for community: **bonding versus bridging**. "Some networks link people who are similar in crucial respects and tend to be inward-looking—**bonding** social capital. Others encompass different types of people and tend to be outward-looking—**bridging** social capital. Both bonding and bridging social networks have their uses. Bonding social capital is a kind of sociological Super Glue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. If you get sick, the people who bring you chicken soup are likely to represent your **bonding** social capital. On the other hand, a society that has *only* bonding social capital will [be] segregated into mutually hostile camps. So a pluralist democracy requires lots of bridging social capital, not just the bonding variety." [pp. 2-3] This seems to be a useful way to understand the disturbing polarization that is fed by our bipolar political system and amplified by our conflict-driven media.

Most of us are better at bonding than bridging. Much of what we do here in our Fellowship revolves around bonding—the personal connections that develop as a result of activities such as the sharing of joys and concerns every Sunday, our Caring Network, social events like our monthly potlucks and Irish Pub Night, and a host of small groups organized around shared interests. We value the companionship and support of the kindred spirits we find here. Here we express our opinions freely without fear of disapproval. However, there is a downside to all of this bonding—especially if it has the effect of excluding those who are not "like us." As a denomination, we UUs are highly educated, overwhelmingly white, and middle- or upper-middle class.

In the current issue of *UU World* magazine, Mark Harris asks, "Does a liberal faith only appeal to a narrow segment of the population—a liberal, economically comfortable, well-educated elite—or is that simply a self-fulfilling prophecy?" [*UU World*, Spring 2011, p. 24] He traces the historical roots of our elitism in the Unitarian strand of our heritage—particularly in New England, where Unitarians held positions of economic and political power. The Universalists, on the other hand, were more likely to come from humbler backgrounds: farmers, small-time merchants, and blue-collar workers. "Universalist congregations welcomed both rich and poor, businessman and seamstress alike. The elite Unitarians found the embodiment of their democratic faith much more difficult, and this remains a challenge to Unitarian Universalists today. How do we live out a faith where all are truly welcome? Who is our message for? Margaret Fuller [a 19th century feminist and social revolutionary] once wrote to her Unitarian father, "Your reluctance to go 'among strangers' cannot too soon be overcome; & the way to overcome it, is not to remain *at home*, but to go among them With them you have a fair opportunity to *begin the world anew* . . ." [quoted by Harris, p. 27] This week our men's group will discuss *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, which vividly describes the ways that working-class Americans have been snubbed by liberals and exploited by conservatives.

Building bridges to those who are different involves courage, initiative, and a willingness to be uncomfortable. Shortly after I arrived in Waynesboro in 1997, there was a racial confrontation at the local high school. Police were called, pepper spray was used, arrests were

made, and the community was in an uproar. When I attended the monthly meeting of the Waynesboro Ministerial Association, I expected that the incident at the high school would be the focus of our discussion and our efforts at community reconciliation. At that time, the ministerial association was dominated by evangelicals, who spent most of our meeting time discussing tactics for preventing beer sales at the Friday evening community party sponsored by the city. After a very brief discussion, they decided that the best response to the growing interracial tensions was simply to pray about it. As I left the ministers meeting, I vowed to never return. Recently, however, I learned that the local ministers association has taken the lead in offering shelter for homeless people here in Waynesboro. So it sounds like the time has come for me to set aside my old resentments and get re-connected with this group.

Bridging across religious and cultural boundaries requires special effort—particularly in a community like ours where the bonds of conservatism are strong. Most Americans do not seem to understand that majority rule does not apply to tolerance of religious diversity. The tension between the rights of the religious majority and those of minority groups is not just an abstract issue here in our area. It appeared dramatically in Staunton a few years ago, when a group of parents challenged the absence of an alternative to the Weekday Religious Education program that removed elementary students from their classrooms during school hours so they could attend Bible education classes off school property. I recall vividly the public meeting in the packed cafeteria at Shelburne Middle School, where supporters of an alternative program for students who “opted-out” of WRE were met by with open hostility by the pro-WRE supporters. Did any of you attend that meeting? I will always admire the courage of the parents who spoke out in favor of diversity at that meeting, as well as the members of the Staunton Board of Education who decided to offer the “Roots and Shoots” program as an alternative to the WRE classes. To me, this was a “win-win” solution to the issue of religious diversity in our community.

One of the ways to build bridges is through interfaith dialogue, like we did last weekend when Rabbi Joe Blair and I traded pulpits. Both of us emphasized the common ground between our two faiths—especially our emphasis on the importance of ethical conduct in **this life** rather than preoccupation with salvation in the afterlife. Liberal congregations have a unique role to play in promoting religious diversity in our community and actively opposing any attempts to divide our community along religious lines. As much as these efforts may help to promote mutual understanding and respect, these conversations also remind us of the differences in history, customs, and beliefs among different religious traditions. One of the most effective ways to promote mutual respect among different religious traditions is through interfaith community service projects—feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, mentoring young people from troubled families, and caring for those who are most harmed by our current economic recession. These efforts on behalf of community-building require more than just tolerance; they require active collaboration. They build bridges across troubled waters. Let me close with a poem by Ibn Arabi, which was discovered hanging on the wall of a Moroccan tea shop:

There was a time I would reject those who were not of my faith.

But now, my heart has grown capable of taking on all forms.

It is a pasture for gazelles, an abbey for monks.

A table for the Torah, Kaaba for the pilgrim.

My religion is love.

Whichever the route love’s caravan shall take,

That shall be the path of my faith.

[Sam M. Intrator & Megan Scribner (eds.), *Leading from Within*, p. 139]

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 122 “Sound Over All Waters”

CLOSING WORDS # 456 (in unison)