

SEARCHING FOR UNITY IN THE MIDST OF DIVERSITY

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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May 8, 2011

Over the past several months, my monthly sermons have explored the challenges of religious diversity. America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Perhaps for that very reason, we struggle constantly to strike a balance between our tradition of tolerance and our longing for the security and presumed cohesion of the past. In her book *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck offers a useful framework for understanding the different ways Americans respond to the challenges of religious diversity: **exclusion, assimilation, and pluralism**. “For **exclusionists**, the answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity, which seemed to threaten the very core civilization of America, was to close the door. . . . The message, in brief, was stay home, or go home, or in any case be excluded from the table of participation here in America.” In our present context, this response is greatly amplified by perceived threats to our security and the media-fed stereotype of all Muslims as antagonistic toward America.

“For **assimilationists**, the invitation to new immigrants was to come, but leave your differences behind as quickly as possible. In other words, come and be like us.” One of the most outspoken advocates of assimilation was President Woodrow Wilson, who told his fellow citizens, “You cannot become a thorough American if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups.” [quoted by Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*, p. 155] For many Muslims and others from different backgrounds, this approach poses a real dilemma as they struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs and practices with their desire to become part of mainstream American society. They are understandably concerned about the attempts by exclusionists to marginalize them and their religious faith as threats to America. They join the ranks of other groups from the past who have felt the sting of American exclusivism: Catholics, Jews, and followers of Asian religions. The guiding metaphor of the assimilationist position is America as the great Melting Pot, where cultural and religious differences would vanish in the crucible of a uniquely American culture.

“For the **pluralist**, the American promise was to come as you are, with all your differences, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship. In other words, come and be yourselves.” The American motto is *E pluribus unum*: **One out of many**. As Diana Eck says, “For the exclusivist, the oneness of the *unum* requires the exclusion of those who are different. The manyness of too much difference poses a threat to oneness. For the assimilationist, the oneness requires the many to shed their differences and become assimilated into the [dominant] culture. For the pluralist, the oneness is shaped by the encounter of the many, the engagement of the many.” [Eck, p. 47]

In discussing religious diversity, Eck uses the analogy of a **symphony orchestra**, in which the variety of the instruments contributes to the richness of the overall musical experience—sounding together **not in unison but in harmony**. The symphony metaphor was first offered nearly a century ago by a sociologist named Horace Kallen, a Jewish immigrant who in 1915 wrote a much-discussed article in which he challenged the melting-pot ideal as anti-democratic. Against Woodrow Wilson and other advocates of the Melting Pot ideal, Kallen argued that all Americans—as individuals and as religious subcultures—have the right to be different, not only in their dress and customs, but more importantly in their religious beliefs and practices. In the nearly 100 years since then, America has become even more religiously diverse with the influx of Asian and Muslim immigrants and the revival of interest in Native American religion. As a result, our culture has become richer, fuller, and more inclusive.

As devout pluralists, Unitarian Universalists have faith that **diversity is a strength, not a liability**. Unlike our exclusivist counterparts, we welcome differences of opinion because our sense of unity is **not** based on uniformity of belief. What makes this possible is our shared faith that underlying the endless variety of religious beliefs and practices, there is a single undivided **unity**, by whatever name we call it. This faith reflects our Unitarian heritage. Underlying the many different names for that which is most sacred and most profound there is a single Ultimate Reality that includes and transcends all of the words and metaphors humankind has devised for trying to describe it over the course of human history. None of the particular manifestations of this Reality can claim to exclude all of the others. We have faith in the wisdom found in many

different spiritual traditions. This reflects our Universalist heritage. Our faith in one-ness makes our acceptance of “many-ness” possible.

I do not mean to imply that UUs have a monopoly on embracing religious diversity. Too often we hear only about Christian exclusionism, but there are also many **inclusive** Christians who understand that “there is truth in other religions besides Christianity, that these religions are legitimate ways of understanding and relating to God, and that there is much to be learned by Christians from gaining familiarity with these other religions.” [Wuthnow, p. 130] As Robert Wuthnow observes in his book *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, “A person who tries to live as an [inclusive] Christian does so . . . **not** as someone who has a special corner on the truth, **not** by reciting or believing in certain doctrinal principles, but by being a good and decent person who lives in hope and shows love to others.” [p. 148] Recently I saw an interview with a Muslim leader and the minister of a Methodist church who invited the Muslim group to use their church social hall for their weekly prayer meetings.

One of the greatest hazards of living in a culture where we are often bombarded and sometimes overwhelmed with diversity is that we will lose our sense of personal and collective centeredness. Our lives become fragmented as we carom like a pinball from one distraction to another in our personal lives and from one crisis news event to another in our collective life. Let me suggest a few ways to maintain a sense of coherence and unity in the face of all this clutter. **First, limit your exposure to the news.** With the advent of round-the-clock cable news, we are bombarded with a never-ending stream of dramatic events—crimes, crises, and controversies from all around the world, amplified with commentary and debates by a host of commentators and ordinary citizens. I have reverted to watching network news for a half hour each evening and then turning to tasks whose outcomes I can actually affect rather than worrying about problems I have no control over.

Second, practice mindfulness. Mindfulness teaches us to focus our attention on one thing at a time. It provides a much-needed counterbalance to multi-tasking, which forces us to divide our attention. The cornerstone of mindfulness is **meditation**—a discipline that can be found in all the world’s major spiritual traditions, as well as secular applications such as biofeedback training. Mindfulness originated as a spiritual discipline to enhance one’s awareness and appreciation of the here-and-now moments of life. As I grow older and have

more and more difficulty holding more than one thought at a time, I have begun to appreciate mindfulness as a **survival tool** as well!

Third, learn to accept the difference between perfection and wholeness. We are constantly urged toward the pursuit of perfection—the perfect wedding, the perfect gift, the perfect partner—usually as part of some attempt to sell us a product or service. The need for perfection can never be fully satisfied. Whereas perfection is a destination, the search for wholeness is an open-ended process. Pursuing wholeness allows us to accept our incompleteness, our shortcomings, and paradoxes. In their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Catherine Ketcham write, “The core paradox that underlies spirituality is the haunting sense of incompleteness, of being somehow *unfinished*, that comes from the reality of living on this earth as part and yet also not-part of it. For to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completeness; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness.” [p. 19]

Finally, the pursuit of wholeness requires a supportive community—a community of kindred souls who are willing to acknowledge their incompleteness and imperfections even as we join together in our shared quest for a meaningful life. The delicate balance between diversity and unity is lived out right here in the way we treat one another—not just by accepting our differences but learning from one another and supporting one another in our shared journeys. In the words of Kathleen McTigue:

We come together this morning to remind one another to rest for a moment on the
forming edge of our lives,
To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,
Until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude,
Taking the time to look into one another’s faces
And see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.
This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope, is hallowed by our presence
together. [*Singing the Living Tradition*, # 435]