

**THE DIVERSITY WITHIN**  
**Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro  
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The theme for my monthly sermon series this year is **religious diversity**. During the past six months, I have discussed the issue of religious diversity at the levels of our culture, our community, and our congregation. Today I want to explore how we experience diversity at a **personal** level. You may be wondering: How does religious diversity show up in our personal lives? Many of us have had a variety of experiences with religion during the course of our lives. The residual effects of these experiences, both positive and negative, remain with us—even when we think we have left them behind—as inner conflicts that may not have been fully resolved. And so, as the monthly series has progressed onion-like from outside to inside, today I want to invite you to explore religious diversity from the **inside** by reflecting on the religious diversity that **you yourself embody**. How can we incorporate the many different and sometimes **conflicting** experiences we have had into a coherent, integrated sense of who we are and what our life means?

Let me begin with an inspiring example: **Dr. Charles Eastman** (also known by his Sioux Indian name of **Ohiyesa**) whose life story epitomizes the ability to reconcile different and often conflicting strands of experience into a life of integrity. He was first named **Hakadah** (which means the Pitiful Last One) because his mother died shortly after his birth. His father took part in the failed Dakota Sioux uprising of 1862, for which he was sentenced to be executed. Along with many other Sioux, his grandparents fled to safety in Manitoba, Canada, where he was raised until the age of 15 in the traditional Indian way. Unbeknownst to them, his father's death sentence had been commuted to a prison term by President Abraham Lincoln. During his 12 years in federal prison, Ohiyesa's father had converted to Christianity, and when he suddenly reappeared, he insisted that his son be baptized under the name of Charles Alexander Eastman, and he enrolled his son in an "Indian school" run by Presbyterian missionaries. With support from Christian benefactors and driven by his own personal grit, Charles enrolled in a series of prestigious colleges, which culminated in his earning a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth, where he was captain of the football team, and an M.D. from Boston University, where he was elected by his classmates to deliver the graduation address.

Yet he never forgot his roots in his native people or his commitment to their welfare. In 1890 Dr. Eastman took his first job as a physician at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, which was the scene of one of the most reprehensible events in American history. The Ghost Dance revival movement had swept across the western reservations, promising a restoration of American Indian dignity and culture. Though it stressed peace and non-violent dance, vision, and prayer, it was banned by the federal government. A band of Sioux led by Chief Big Foot was intercepted by heavily armed cavalry on their way to surrendering at a place called Wounded Knee. In the

ensuing massacre nearly half of the Sioux--most of them woman and children--were killed or wounded, left to die on the frozen plains. Dr. Eastman and his wife Elaine tried to rescue as many of the survivors as they could. After he protested the brutality he had witnessed at Wounded Knee and the cover-ups that followed, he was fired from his position with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Dr. Eastman's adversities did not end at Wounded Knee. Even though he passed his licensing exams to practice medicine in Minnesota, he was constantly harassed by state government officials, who charged him with illegally practicing medicine. Faced with the demands of supporting his wife and two young children, he took a job with the YMCA working on Indian reservations--a position that made no use of his training as a medical doctor. Later, when he got a job as a physician on the Crow Indian reservation, he initiated a program to persuade distrustful Indians to be vaccinated against the diseases that continued to decimate the Native American population. But once again he was fired for supporting Indian claims against government policies.

Imagine if you can the profound sense of disappointment and anger that this man felt at this time in his life. He was torn between the past and the future and torn between two cultures. His valiant attempts to serve the people of his native culture had been rebuffed by the new dominant culture that had once seemed so promising to him. You might think that he would withdraw from this internal conflict in despair. But Ohiyesa ("Winner") did not withdraw. Instead, he embarked on a lifelong mission to reconcile the vastly different cultures that dwelled within him to a much wider audience. He personally interviewed some of the great remaining figures in American Indian history: Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and shared their extraordinary life stories with a far wider American audience. [*Great Heroes and Great Chieftains*] His autobiographical works offer vivid descriptions of American Indian life. [*Indian Boyhood; The Soul of the American Indian; From the Deep Woods to Civilization*] He helped preserve the history and dignity of his people.

Yet he did even more to connect the two cultures he had experienced. He was active in the formation of both the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls. His book titled *Indian Scout Talks* was dedicated to both of these groups. His writings were instrumental in helping future generations of American youth appreciate the wisdom and knowledge of Native Americans in relation to our natural environment.

The story of Dr. Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) provides a dramatic example of how an individual can transcend internal conflicts that may seem to be irreconcilable. Each of us carries baggage from our religious past. How can we keep that baggage from permanently weighing us down? The first step is to openly acknowledge our wounds and resentments from the past. But we must also move beyond this stage and search for alternative answers rather than dwelling on our resentments. In his book titled *Spiritual But Not Religious*, Robert Fuller says, "Those who see themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious' reject traditional organized religion as the sole—or even the most valuable—means of furthering their spiritual growth. Many have had negative experiences with churches or church leaders. For example, they may have perceived church leaders as more concerned with building an organization than promoting

spirituality, as hypocritical, or as narrow-minded. Some may have experienced various forms of emotional or even sexual abuse. Forsaking formal religious organizations, these people have instead embraced an individualized spirituality that includes picking and choosing from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. They typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development.” [Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual But Not Religious*, p. 6]

Spiritual individualism is deeply embedded in the Unitarian Universalist movement. The first of our seven principles declares the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and we have cultivated a denominational culture that promotes freedom of individual expression on religious issues. Indeed, one could argue that spiritual individualism is the **cornerstone** of our movement. Unitarian Universalist congregations are magnets that attract many kinds of religious nonconformists. Although it may be our cornerstone, spiritual self-fulfillment is not and **should not** be the sole purpose of our congregational life. As I often say to participants in our Newcomer Seminar, individuality comes easily to most UUs. The real challenge is building and maintaining a sense of **community**--not only within our congregation, but also a sense of connection between our Fellowship and our surrounding community. Each of us needs to learn how to balance our natural inclination toward self-fulfillment with our responsiveness to the needs of others.

Ultimately, spiritual self-fulfillment and social justice go hand in hand. Alternative religious movements such as Unitarian Universalism “teach the ethical importance of recognizing the presence of God within ourselves and each other. They stress the holistic, interdependent nature of our evolving universe. Because everything in life is interconnected, we have a moral responsibility to promote ‘life, at any and every level of development.’ This makes every form of exploitation a sin against the ‘god within.’ Sexism, racism, and insensitivity to ecological issues prevent individuals or organisms from expressing their full divine potentials and thus reveal a total lack of spiritual understanding.” [Fuller, p. 157]

Toward the end of his classic study titled *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote, “Not God but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is in the last analysis the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.” [quoted by Fuller, p. 157] In the words of Marge Piercy:

Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:

Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.  
This is how we are going to live for a long time:  
Not always, for every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting,  
After the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.