



Belonging: Our deepest need

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based on a sermon from October 24, 1993:

Unity and Diversity

Today I have taken some of the thoughts I want to express from a sermon that I wrote in 1993. As I was thinking about the topic of belonging as our deepest and basic need; I remembered that I have often pondered the tension inherent in how to be fully part of something that represents unity while figuring out a sense of belonging in an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi religious world. I remembered in that sermon reflecting **on how James Luther Adams gave a new twist to the biblical story 'The Tower of Babel'.**

A retired colleague of mine, who had served his congregation for over 20 years, challenged me to go back to old sermons and revisit them with you in these next few months, to see if they still hold truths, so as I too prepare to transition into retirement, I bring some thoughts from that sermon to you.

I have been thinking of James Luther Adams a bit lately too, so it fits together well. As you know I have just been given a faculty position at Andover Newton Theological School. The school has had many UU adjunct faculty but James Luther Adams and I are the only two Unitarian Universalist who have been given the designation faculty. And, as I think about how to stay true to my Unitarian Universalism in a seminary that has had a history of strong Christianity, [I am not in that camp], I have been thinking about how do I belong there and how do I help UU students get a sense that they belong there too, and how do I work with them so that they

get a sense of belonging to the larger world, as religious leaders who are **trying to foster a sense of unity. Let's face it we** are living in fractious times and it would be too easy to neglect dealing with questions about who belongs to what, how do they belong to what, how do **we** belong, how do we maintain our uniqueness, how do we honor and respect difference and still feel a sense of belonging that satisfy a basic and deep need? These are the type of questions that keep me up at night. I know you too must have questions like this too. So when I am done talking a bit, I want to give us time to have some testimonies about how, to what and why you belong to this church or a group that is more than you alone and maybe is more diverse than you.

Diversity and belonging seem to be at odds with one another don't they? I mean just take a moment to see the variety of persons gathered with you here in this place and on this morning to worship. We are a diverse and unique group, some elder, some younger, some grey, some blonde, some lots of hair, some not so much, some blue eyes, some brown, some green, some working persons, some retired, some alone, some with many around them, some cat lovers, some dog lovers, some bird lovers, some television viewers, some movie buffs, some readers, some crossword puzzle solvers, some solitaire players, some dancers, some singers, some listeners, some talkers, some women, some men, not to mention the various class, religion, ethnic particularities. We are a diverse group-just here.

Now think about those who you see in your daily life, those you see in this town and in the adjoining towns, some Euro American, some African American, some Latino/Latina/Hispanic, some Pacific Islanders, Korean, Vietnamese, Laotian, Japanese, Native American, Irish, French, Italian, Greek, some rich, some poor, some in the middle, some you understand, **some you don't, some you know and some you don't, and around us the** world is diverse and abounds with people with different backgrounds and life styles. How can we get a sense of belonging out of all that?

How many of you know the "Where's Waldo?" books? One of the reasons that I think we like to solve the puzzle and find him, is that we want to **identify that which doesn't fit into our preconceived pattern. We look for** Waldo among daily life experiences and when we see him we can notice his differences, we notice how he stands out as a unique and special figure, identified because of his difference. Part of our security, part of our need to belong is to blend into and be with similar groups and types. In the times way past to be able to identify the one who did not fit in, to be able to

find Waldo, provided safety and security. But now with our rapidly changing world, with threats and insecurity our sense of belonging / and unity can be upset by anyone who is different. Our basic biology has not evolved sufficiently to keep up with the reality of the changing world.

So how do we navigate this reality? It is not bad to see differences, nor is it bad to pay attention to differences or to be aware of differences- what is bad, unhealthy and difficult is when we act against or on our assumptions **about those differences. We love “where’s Waldo?” because we can** recognize where we fit and where the order we have established is not present. The author Sebastian Junger in his book *Tribe*, writes about the sense of belonging that comes from serving in war time situations, and that comes from time of tragedy and loss, and from needing to belong to a **group that will sacrifice self for the larger good. He writes, “The sense of solidarity is at the core of what it means to be human and undoubtedly helped deliver us to the extraordinary moment in history.’**

What is this extraordinary moment? I think it is the possibility to belong to a world community that can honor differences, diversity and at the same time can honor and build a unity that is more than simple words, more than a simplistic statement that we are all alike. This morning in the paper a rap singer, who happens to be black, stated that there was no racism because the people who attended his concert were white. This is an example of a simplistic attempt to dismiss diversity, to skip over the complexity of living, moving and being in a radially diverse culture. Looking at a group and not finding Waldo is a misguided as is looking at a group and seeing Waldo at the exclusion the uniformity of the others in the picture.

We as Unitarian Universalist tell the world that we enjoy and even thrive in this diverse world. However, a question that we must begin to explore— especially if we are going to be a viable religion into the future, is how can we applaud, appreciate, celebrate, honor and nurture the diversity of each person, yet at the same time come together as a unified community that has a common core with which to unify us in our diversity.

Does the coming together in community mean that individual’s uniqueness and preciousness must be left at the door? I fear that if we forced the submission of the individual character or did not encourage individuality we would become a very bland and boring religious group, yet I have also seen that diversity has caused problems.

These problems are not just specific to our church community or our Unitarian Universalist Association either but show up in our secular lives. America – the home of the free, the new frontier, the place to come too and explore and expand your individuality has led us into times of turmoil and upheaval. We have long been the nation that hailed the individual as the keeper and harbinger of the good of the best, the rugged individualism of persons is front page news. But, this creates two problems, one is that not only do we tout individualism as an ideal but we end up having a vision that the only persons who can benefit from our country are those who think, look and act like us. The second problem is that though our words speak of the importance of individuality and our words speak of the freedom of the individual many of us are feeling that we are only an insignificant being in the mass of society, that we are only an infinitesimal part of a group that is at the whim of the lowest common denominator and we end up feeling very non individualistic, very controlled, very limited, very much a small part of a whole, that we do not have any control over nor even understand. We are lonely in a group and it becomes harder and harder to find a place to exercise both the desire for our individuality and the pull to be part of a meaningful group.

Witness the discussions, arguments, opinions about football players taking a knee during the singing of the National Anthem at the beginning of the game. Talk **about an ideal example of teaching about individual's action up** against group belonging. I hope a few of you pick up this topic for discussion over fellowship time and discuss those tensions.

I would like to suggest that a religious community and our religious community, to be specific, is the place where we can meet to explore these competing needs and these confusing thoughts.

James Luther Adams, the Unitarian theologian that I mentioned earlier provided me with new understandings about diversity and unity in the novel way that he translated the story known as the Tower of Babel. You may remember this ancient biblical story about the people of one particular place building a tower that would reach high into the heavens. The common group joined together for the singular purpose of building a tower that was higher than anything in existence. Their alleged purpose in building this was to prove their value and worth and their mighty and powerful strength as one unified group. Supposedly, when God observed this tower, God became angry and decided that they should be divided by language and culture and that they should become a diverse group not

unified in culture, language or ethnicity. And in bible stories what God wants to happen happens and the people were scattered far and wide as punishment. James Luther Adams gave new meaning to the story. He believed that the people were scattered was not as punishment for building anything bigger and grander that was already put there by God, but rather as a reminder that we all are dependent on the many to accomplish great things and that we are all connected under a higher order, which gives us a sense of belonging to and with others. Thus the scattering of the peoples and the confusing of language is to be seen as a blessing not a curse.

Only if we are scattered and diverse, will we recognize our sameness, our alikeness, our common source and our connections and our dependence on something not of our own making this then will give us a sense of belonging to something more precious than our own being.

And as for our unity, I suspect we agree that there are some basic virtues – honesty, respectfulness, promise keeping, fairness, and the desire to give and get love, sharing these no matter our differences gives us a sense of belonging. And not only are we connected by common virtues, we are connected by common questions, common strivings, and common suffering.

James Luther Adams writes, “We are called to seek the unity of fellowship that issues from our together confronting the questions that have been raised by the diverse traditions and by our own experience, and from our together testing our answers in thought and in life, under the great taskmaster’s eye.”

It is not by putting aside one’s individuality that a religious community will grow, nor is it by the strength of any one person’s individual nature that a religious community grows, but it is by the recognition of diversity; cultural, ethnic, ability, gifts, strengths, likes, dislikes and life experiences that a religious community flourishes. It is then we can have a sense of belonging. So Be It.

Benediction

Let us be gathered in this sacred space with other seekers who wonder how and what it is needed to come together to create a place of belonging, where we can be transformed, and where we can celebrate the preciousness of our individual beings as we attempt to join together to experience what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist presence in the

world today. And let us go forth emboldened knowing that we belong to one another.