

A COMMUNITY OF MANY DIVERSITIES

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
10 JANUARY 2010

READINGS

Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

The person you have known a long time is embedded in you like a jewel.
The person you have just met casts out a few glistening beams and you are fascinated to see more of them.
How many more are there?
With someone you've barely met the curiosity is intoxicating.

SERMON

We share soul-nourishing worship that transforms, challenges and nourishes.

We live the openness of our tradition and grow ever more diverse in overcoming the barriers that divide the human family.

We respond to prejudice, injustice and oppression, especially in supporting and affirming the GLBTQ community and in alleviating homelessness and hunger.

We cherish our beautifully expanded, green and accessible space where all are safe and accepted.

The Board of Trustees crafted these statements to be what guides us as a congregation as we live into the kind of people and the kind of community we want to be. The three broadest of the Ends Statements are written on the back of your order of service. They are about who we are and who we want to become. What is true about the world – within and among and beyond us – because this religious body exists?

We start looking *within* – how will the people who come to this church be changed by being here? Our fond hope is that “the people of Atkinson Memorial Church will have a deeply meaningful, liberal and spiritual experience that changes the way they live their lives.”

Next we look *among* us – how will we be changed together? What will we do together? We hope to be and become “a vital, radically welcoming *community of many diversities* where members and friends deepen their connection to one another and other Unitarian Universalists and congregations.”

Finally, we look *beyond* our walls – how will the world be a better place because this church is here? We hope that we will be and become “a visible leader and partner, as a beacon of liberal religion and a haven for justice and equity. Oregon City, Clackamas County and the Portland area is a more just and compassionate community because of Atkinson’s prophetic leadership.”

Isn’t that a lovely thought, that we might help make the whole community in which we live “more just and compassionate.”

These Ends Statements are profound and beautiful enough to guide us into the future. Not that they are written in stone. One of the Board’s main jobs will be to hold them up to you but also to listen to you – your hopes and dreams – about who you are and who you hope to become. That’s part of why the Board will be holding periodic Town Hall Meetings like the one after church next Sunday. They want to let you know what’s going on, and they want to know what you think is going on and what should go on.

I find the Board’s Ends Statements both inspirational and aspirational – today’s worship is in service to one of them. For today we are considering what it means to be “a community of many diversities.”

So often we think of diversity in black and white or racial terms. We fret about why we do not have more people of color in our congregations.

When Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed was here in December, he spoke to us, as an African American minister in our tradition about his experience in a largely white denomination. And his answer to what we can do to become more diverse was surprising. He said, nothing we do will make much difference.

He put it this way in the UUWorld magazine: “The issue is increasingly one of class and not race.” ... Religions are always bound to culture and class, and Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by its upper-middle-class, liberal, North American values. The reason we don’t have many Afro-Americans [the word he prefers] is the same reason we don’t have many

working-class or poor members. “Look at the average UU education level, 17.2 years, which is almost a master’s degree.... There are simply not that many Afro-Americans in that demographic.” But, he predicts, as the number of highly educated and middle-class people of color increases in the general population at large, more will be drawn to Unitarian Universalism, *as long as we are welcoming to them.*”

Morrison-Reed says that demographics are more significant than any denominational programs to counter racism and oppression. “If we do nothing—and I’m not advocating that—things are still going to change. We have to ask not ‘How?’ as much as ‘Why do we want it, and will we be ready for that change when it comes?’”

And that is what he calls “the perversity of diversity.” Integration is not about assimilation, but melding different parts to form a new whole. “Pursue diversity and you invite change,” he says. “Change and you become something different from what you were drawn to in the beginning. And that is the conundrum.”

It is a seeming paradox, but what we need to do to become more diverse is first to acknowledge who we are. Clarity of identity can help us see where we want to change and grow, and what we want to cherish and maintain.

Just a few months before the controversy erupted about Jeremiah Wright as Obama’s minister, Wright spoke to the Unitarian Universalist ministers at General Assembly in Portland. He was articulate, thoughtful and impressive. He gave us history of the black church and its struggles with identity in a white culture. How to blend a kind of reserved Protestantism and the more embodied African worship spirit. His own church resolved the tension by proclaiming themselves “Unabashedly Black and Unapologetically Christian.” When the church defined itself that clearly, it began to grow like gangbusters, and paradoxically began attracting more white parishioners. It seems knowing clearly who you are is attractive.

One of our weaknesses as a faith tradition is that in embracing many theological perspectives, we somehow think we have to be all things to all people. That is simply not possible. So we are left with fuzzy edges about who we are.

Part of who we are is something we don’t think we’re supposed to be. But both Wright and Morrison-Reed say that we must acknowledge that we are largely white, middle class and educated.

We are and have been a religious people who insist that we must bring reason to our religious lives. The life of the mind and an intellectual curiosity are central values. We want to blend this with the life of the heart, although that’s not always so obvious. Blind faith just doesn’t make sense to us. I’ve heard people say, I don’t want to have to check my mind at the door when I come to church.

All this makes us often – but not always – well-educated and middle class. Owning this is important, yet we do ourselves a disservice if we stop there. For we are far more complex.

We are already far more diverse than we give ourselves credit for. We already are and are becoming a “community of many diversities.” Yet as Morrison-Reed says, our deeper issues are more about class than race.

How many of you knew that Nancy grew up as a working class Italian with blonde hair which made her feel like a minority twice over? And I love what her perspective has taught me about something as simple as what we wear to church.

Last week when I spoke about race and white privilege, people told me all sorts of stories. Someone told me of growing up white in a mostly black neighborhood and having a boss who was black in his first job. I told the story of a woman who referred to an African American as “uppity” without perhaps knowing the serious racist overtones of that word in that context. More than one of you told me that in your own background, that was a word that lower class white folks used

against each other, meaning that someone was class-climbing. Indeed, it is a term that is sometimes applied to women trying “to rise above their station.” I loved learning such nuance.

There is so much more to us than we realize.

A dear friend in my home church appeared to fit right in with our Unitarian Universalist culture. She was the daughter of two college professors and a well-educated professional herself. She was raised in a particular American upper socio-economic culture. Yet her father was Puerto Rican. Although she does not look particularly Latina, she has a kind of boisterous and emotionally expressive demeanor and often felt oddly out of place in white culture. This was something she didn't fully understand until sometime in her 40s, she found herself in a group of Puerto Rican women. They were all talking loudly, using their hands, talking over one another, having a grand time. She felt at home in a way she never had before.

Even through the effort of naming who we are, we must also resist being superficial or rigid. Yes, we are a people who appreciate the life of the mind, indeed we find spiritual nourishment in exploring what it means to be a thinking religious people. And we are so much more than that.

Trouble is that our diversity in socio-economics and education and race is not always immediately obvious. We can be intimidating. People who come from the working class or don't have multiple degrees – even as they are equally intellectually curious - can wonder if they fit. And unless we talk about it, they might not see the diversities among us.

And the truth is we are not just wildly intellectual. John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, said that we should “give them, not hell, but hope and courage.”

I still think often of Anita Reed who died last spring. She came from a downright deprived background, barely graduated from high school and lived a very hard life. Yet the heart of this church captured her heart. We gave her not hell, but hope and courage, and we profoundly enriched the last years of her life. (Not to take anything from the ways her presence enriched us.) Our embracing Universalist theology speaks to the heart in profound ways. And it can keep us from being utterly caught up in the intellect.

For all of how important it is for us to claim our identity and find strength in it, we must also not be a place where you must check any part of yourself at the door. We mean it when we sing, Come, Come, Whoever You Are.

And so we must land, as Naomi Shihab Nye tells us in both kindness and curiosity. Nye, born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, grew up in St. Louis, Jerusalem and San Antonio. She knows something about embracing many diversities.

And she knows also

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

For that is perhaps the deepest truth that our religious path points to. All humans know sorrow, no matter our background or race or education. That is part of what the disaster in Haiti is showing us once again. We are all one in sorrow, and that should also carry us into kindness.

Yet kindness is only half of what we need to embrace our diversities. We also need curiosity. We need to be able to tell our stories – with all parts of it intact. And we need to listen to each other with open-hearted curiosity. How is it being you? What brings you here? And what do you bring here? What is your story?

Stories are powerful Morrison-Reed tells us. We can learn the importance of narrative from the traditionally black churches, and from people of color as they come into our faith. Our stories keep us from getting lost in our heads.

“What our movement needs shouldn’t focus so much on race,” he says. “It should be: What do we need to become more open to the spirit and more accessible in general—in our music, liturgy, celebration, and story? What is it we’re inviting people to?”

It’s not necessarily about being more intentionally diverse. It’s about acknowledging who we are – with the many diversities that are already present – and moving with an open-hearted kindness and curiosity. Knowing who we are, and being willing to be more.

Listen to the stories we have to tell. Don’t assume anything about anyone – not about their race, their culture, their education, their class background. Let each new person you meet intoxicate you with curiosity.

The poet Marge Piercy has written of the power of a people together. She says, the power of a community
“starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

May we move with and toward one another with kindness. May each new soul we encounter spark our curiosity. And may we endeavor always to expand and grow who We are – both as individuals and as a community.

Blessed Be.
Amen.