

Dancing Along Our Edges

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First Parish in Brookline

Are you looking for a religious home that welcomes diversity of thought and belief? If you are looking for a religion that is more than a narrow statement of faith, welcomes dialogue around deep questions that have more than one answer, encourages members to define their own religious beliefs while sharing the journey in companionship with others then visit a UU congregation. These are words of the current UUA marketing campaign for Unitarian Universalism. Are they true for us? I ask you, could you be a (fill in blank) and be a good UU?

I attended a workshop at the June 2008 UUA GA where the speaker listed the ten biggest messages that tell visitors they are not welcome in a congregation. Would you like to know what they are? She said 1) poor signage outside to find the building; 2) a shabby exterior that makes you ask if the building is still in use; 3) poor access to the building; 4) finding nobody who seems like you when you go inside; 5) frequent use of insider language newcomers find hard to understand; 6) a lack of greeting newcomers; 7) a lack of clear directions about what happens next in the service; 8) lack of programs for newcomers to meet long timers; 9) worn carpets or poor lighting in the sanctuary; and 10) a poor sound system. I must say when Rev. Martha and I candidated here 3½ years ago, this community did poorly on many of these ten criteria, even though people wanted to do better. Now we have made considerable progress along many of these dimensions, but we have lots of room to improve before we can be a truly welcoming congregation. The exterior and the sanctuary still leave much to be desired.

When we first came here I noticed that this congregation had a self image that didn't really fit the people who were already here. We were told, often in indirect but clear fashion, this congregation was primarily college educated, middle class professionals who owned their own homes in Brookline and their children were all in the gifted children programs, such as School Within a School, in the Brookline public schools. We quickly discovered that this description was far too narrow to describe the range of people in our pews, and that new people seemed to be passing by this congregation, thinking our people weren't much like them, even though we had a much greater diversity of people here already. In many ways, we are the diversity we seek, if we recognize it. You may not believe me, so I'd like to do a quick survey if you're willing? By a show of hands, do you live in Brookline; or do you live elsewhere? Do you own your home; or do you perhaps rent? Do you consider yourself a middle class professional; or do you do other work? Please raise your hand if you were an only child, an eldest child, a middle child, or a youngest child? Please raise your hand if you are not a registered Democrat?

Raise you hand if you don't like coffee hour, or if you skip it regularly, or if you love coffee hour? Please raise you hand if you don't have a college degree; if you don't value your college

degree; if you have too many college degrees; or if you have ever felt less educated than those around you? Please raise your hand if you grew up in a family that earned less than \$20,000 per year; or currently live in a household that earns less than \$40,000 per year; or have ever struggled financially just to pay all of your bills? Please raise your hand if you have ever had serious issues around money; ever worried about being unemployed; or worried about not having enough when you retire? Please raise your hand if you don't have children; or if your children don't go to public school; or if they don't go to school in Brookline? Please raise your hand if you have ever felt like you needed to pretend here to be something other than what you truly are? My favorite theologian, James Luther Adams, said: "Where diversity is suppressed, blasphemy and distortion ensue."

I want to value and respect you as you truly are. I want to know you in all of your facets and diversity. I want to know when you have struggled, why you have struggled, and how you have been changed by all of your struggles. I want to know what you truly love, who have you loved, and how the world has been changed by your love! I don't really care if I know how you fit yourself into the dominant social norms, though as mammals this is an important part of belonging, I want to know what variety you bring to our mix in this community. How does your socio-economic, racial or cultural heritage, religious traditions, sexual orientation, or personal presentation add to the richness and chaos that is First Parish UU in Brookline. Please raise your hand if you have ever felt like the outsider in this group? Please raise your hand if you have ever felt desperately alone; if you have ever struggled with depression; or if you've ever felt ecstatic and elated; if you have ever known you were loved unconditionally? Please raise your hand if you love references and symbols from Christianity and/or Judaism in our worship services; and raise your hands if you don't like references and symbols from Christianity and Judaism in our worship services? Please raise your hand if you like it when I bring in other world religions in worship; and please raise your hand if you don't? We are a diverse and growing community. George Kennan said: "Diversity is the best defense of healthy societies." And so we strive to be a healthy society by honoring our diversity.

The responsive reading we said aloud this morning is my rendering of the conclusions of the UUA Commission on Appraisal's report "engaging our theological diversity." I spent much of the last 48 hours in Minneapolis with the UUA President's Council and the current UUA president, Bill Sinkford. Bill says: "that Unitarian Universalism is growing up, growing out of a cranky and contentious adolescence into a more confident maturity. A maturity in which we can not only claim our Good News, the values we have found in this free faith, but also begin to offer that Good News to the world outside these beautiful sanctuary walls. There is a new willingness on our part to come in from the margins." I ask is this who we are? Are we willing to out and to claim our diversity? Will you journey with me when we explore our Judeo Christian traditions? Can we use their sacred texts and liberal theological ideas to explore and illuminate our own spiritual journeys? If you come to this evening's class we will explore Taoism and Confucianism. Can we learn together the joys of Divali, and wisdom of ancient Hindus and

Buddhists? Can we explore together the latest advances in science in order to better understand and appreciate our world? I think we can! For we remain ever open to the new, we aspire to be a transformative faith, a justice-seeking faith, co-creators of an ever emerging community of seekers after truth.

The Commission on Appraisal says “encouragement to spiritual growth is a stated goal of congregational life in our Principles, and the rich theological milieu present in most of our congregations would seem to be fertile soil for such growth; but if people are afraid to talk about and experience the diversity before them, then the potential for growth will be stunted.” The Christian must feel comfortable worshipping their God alongside the Atheist worshipping without any God. The Jew must recognize their celebrations as clearly as those who are earth centered recognize theirs. The Buddhist must find their quiet meditation time while the secular humanist finds a challenging and reasonable faith here as well. This is a challenging faith but we are all the better for it. I heard a story from my friend Nick Carter, an American Baptist minister who is President of ANTS, which goes like this: “In the summer of 1859 Frenchman Charles Blondin stretched a three-inch rope 1,200 feet across Niagara Falls and, balancing more than 200 feet in the air, he proceeded to tightrope walk from one side to the other. Shortly thereafter he produced a wooden wheel barrow and asked the 100,000 awe-struck observers whether they thought he could repeat his death-defying feat pushing a wheelbarrow. ‘Yes,’ they cried, ‘we believe you can!’ Then he asked if they thought he could cross over Niagara with a person riding in the wheelbarrow. The crowd was frantic with excitement at the proposal and shouted, ‘Yes, we believe you can! Do it!’ Blondin paused and said, ‘Which one of you will volunteer to be that person?’ At that the crowd fell silent.” I like to think that in our community there are those who would risk the courage of their connections in pursuit of new truths.

We are living in an America that is the most religiously diverse large society in the history of the world. We cherish that diversity and attempt to inform our worship here by drawing from some of the religious traditions that we have brought with us into this place as well as from some of the religious traditions that surround us. The Muslim American Society has recently built a new mosque near Roxbury Crossing to help meet the needs of some of the 120,000 Muslims that live in Massachusetts. The Hindus in Eastern Massachusetts have built a new temple dedicated to the Goddess Lakshmi to serve the needs of their folks as well. This Tuesday, October 28 is Divali, the Festival of Lights, one of the biggest festivals in the Hindu calendar. It is considered auspicious to light many small lights on this holiday, to pause and reflect with family and friends on all we may feel grateful for. It is a time of excitement and merriment, of worship and honoring of ancestors, a time to welcome in the Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the good luck that her presence portends. It is a time for fun. The First Parish in Concord, MA has celebrated Divali every year the last 20 years because they have formed a special connection with the Concord Hindu Community. Radha Jalan, or more frequently one of her daughters, dances the traditional Divali dance during the offertory, while the choir sings a traditional Divali hymn. FP in Concord celebrates Divali because Divali provides UUs a

window into Hinduism. But their Music Director, Beth Norton, also tells the story of how this has affected UUs. “Francene is a member of our choir. One afternoon she was having trouble with her computer and ended up with a protracted technical support call with a helper in India. The conversation they had passing the time while waiting for computers to reboot will be familiar to many of you. Finally, her contact said, ‘So, what do you know about India?’ And Francene responded, ‘Raghupati, Raghava, Raja Ram...’ The man on the line in India got very excited: ‘You are the first person to sing Hindu devotional songs to me on the phone! Could you sing it again? I want my supervisor to hear it!’ Francene’s singing that afternoon on a technical support line, of all places, transformed a routine business call into a meaningful human and spiritual connection. A simple devotional song, which had become a part of Francene’s experience through our celebration of Divali, formed a bridge of understanding between cultures and religious traditions in a comical, but ultimately profound moment of recognition.” We honor multiple religious traditions because we recognize the interdependent web of all life. We learn ancient traditions and what their truths can mean for us as 21st century UUs; we are the world.

But Hinduism is important to us for another reason, of all the world’s great religions, it has perhaps done the best job over thousands of years of honoring and celebrating diversity in its midst. Those of you who attended my *Introduction to Sacred Texts* class last Sunday perhaps know this already. Four thousand years ago there was already a religion in the Indus Valley that emphasized connection to the divine through intense meditation and physical love. Then the Aryans, a nomadic warrior people who worshipped using fire, sang noble hymns, and entered into the divine through psychotropic soma, conquered this region and the resulting merger of beliefs became what we know as Hinduism. They made room for the Vedas as well as the Upanishads, for the Bhagavad Gita as well as Vishnu, and the purely spiritual as well as the sensual. Hindus don’t have a particular set of beliefs so much as being religious people who happen to have been born and grown up within the Indus peninsula. They recognize that depending upon your nature, you may achieve self-realization best through the path of knowledge, or the path of devotion, or the path of good works. But all are called within their lifetime to self-realization along a path conducive to their nature. UUs also recognize the path of knowledge, the path of love (which is what we tend to call the path of devotion), and the path of social action, but unlike some Hindus we expect that all will benefit from experiencing, at least a little, each of these paths to connection with the divine. We will have a social action fair today to help us all do so. So in coffee hour you will have an opportunity to choose your personally most conducive path to your connection through social action. Each person should choose a path conducive to them, but all should find a path with heart which helps them to discover their own best self. So let us go forth with knowledge, go forth with love, and go forth with a determination to let our light shine before the world. For Divali is a holiday of light! Blessed be and Amen.