

Sermon – 3-26-17

Why All Faiths Matters: Embracing Diversity

By Joyce Ramay

Our sermons in March have dealt with various aspects of courage. Annely Hudanick shared how it takes courage to be a friend. Werner Stocker told us it takes courage to face the truth of our failures, as he talked about people's lack of resistance against the horrors that led to the holocaust. Joan Marshall stressed that it takes courage to love creation, as we deal with threats to our environment and life on earth. Today I will be talking about the courage it takes to start and sustain a congregation that embraces diversity in a world divided.

Mahatma Gandhi said, *"I believe in the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world. And I believe that if only we could, all of us, read the scriptures of the different Faiths, from the stand-point of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom, all one, and were all helpful to one another."* I always appreciated those words of Gandhi, because we can, indeed, be helpful to one another, when we learn about, and from each other – and that is one of the particularly rare reasons that All Faiths matters.

When I was a child, I went from being the Virgin Mary at the Christmas pageant at the fundamentalist Church of God, to singing Silent Night solos at the Methodist Church, to being May Crowning Queen at the Catholic Church, and singing for the requiem masses in Latin. In our high school world history class, I asked our teacher how we could study world history without learning about the religions of the world. She said she could not teach religion because of separation of church and state, but that if I wanted to, I could organize a class project on the subject. So I gathered information from the public library, and arranged for the 30 students in our class to give presentations on all the major religions. At the University of Minnesota, I studied world history and anthropology, continuing my exploration of human behavior - political, economic and spiritual.

As a young adult, I became a skeptical agnostic, before discovering Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Then I married a Muslim and moved to Pakistan, where I learned about Islam and mysticism. So I guess "all faiths" has been a lifelong experience for me.

I frequently visit the Unitarian Universalist Covenant. Because we do not have a dogma that has been dictated to us, people may say that we don't believe in anything, so it's beneficial to read or hear our covenant of principles and sources periodically, so that we don't forget our inclusive identity.

UUA Covenant

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- * The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- * Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- * Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- * A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- * The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process;
- * The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- * Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:

- * Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
- * Words and deeds of prophetic women and men, which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- * Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- * Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- * Humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

*Spiritual teachings of Earth centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”

Our covenant is a comprehensive summary of the crucial values and rich traditions that inspire us. Here at All Faiths, we exemplify abundant application of these principles, and deep appreciation of these many sources.

We might ask: Why does All Faiths matter? What is it about this congregation that gets us together? There are a lot of good answers in the hymn that we just sang, including a need to be together. But we could be with lots of people, and we could go to many other events or gatherings.

What is it that brings all of us here every Sunday?

What is it that generates our strong desire to be of service?

What is it that motivates us all to be so generous with our Time, Talent and Treasure?

There are, of course, many personal and individual answers to these questions, but there are probably many that we share. We could make long lists of our aspirations, experiences, and achievements.

Each morning when I open my computer, the first thing that I do is to look for any messages from you – requests for help on an All Faiths project, perhaps a notice about a meeting or activity, or an appeal for personal support. Then, too, your emails often share fascinating photos of amazing creations of both nature and human ingenuity, or priceless humor that brings joy. Whatever they may be, your messages have special meaning to me. You matter!!

There is no doubt that we are blessed with many brilliant minds, and extraordinary talents. We often hear words about coming together for *mindful* meditation, or gathering with *like-minded* people. But what we find here might be better characterized as *heartful* meditation, and *like-hearted* people. Let’s be realistic – we aren’t always like-minded, but that’s OK – because we know how to embrace diversity, not just tolerate diversity. (I never liked that word “tolerate” – it sounds so arrogant and condescending - like you are merely putting up with something that is somehow inferior.)

Here we have more than an abstract, intellectual interest in life. We have a passion for experiencing, treasuring, and preserving life - that reveals a strong sense of the sacred, even if you don’t all use such words to describe it. Our lives together demonstrate a commitment to something larger and greater than ourselves, and a responsibility to make a difference in the world in whatever ways that we can.

Back in 2001, when we responded positively to the invitation to meet to consider forming a new group with Rev. Wayne Robinson, we felt a profound and powerful surge of common purpose, and enthusiasm for creating a new congregation, one that would reflect our values and desires to work together in community, with a particular emphasis on respect for shared but varied spiritual pursuits of truth, harmony, justice, peace and benevolence.

Among our founders were people of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, humanist, agnostic and atheist heritages and orientations. Combining people of such diversity would be a challenging task. But we knew that, particularly in today’s world, it was becoming increasingly important for us to discover and implement ways of living together, and loving together, side by side, in a harmony of many notes and diverse rhythms.

It took a lot of courage, belief and trust in each other, to start something new, with a bold vision for the future, but we chose to move forward bravely, and devoted ourselves to the creation of something special – a place where we could find mutual support, a place where we recognized that no one has a monopoly on truth or virtue, and a place where we could dare to explore the heights and depths of our spiritual quests.

We knew that it would not be easy, that there would be difficulties, tensions, and obstacles along the way. But we also knew that it was important for us to form a congregation that would be built upon the foundations of justice, compassion and love.

I don't believe that we have to wait to die to find paradise. Every day of our lives, we have an opportunity to create heaven - right here on Earth, right here along the Caloosahatchee River.

We have already shared together sixteen remarkable years of brotherhood and sisterhood. With your support, we have flourished during the past nine months of transition, without a minister, under the dedicated and inspired leadership of our staff, our Board, our committees, and those who have devoted themselves to providing our Sunday worship services, and hardworking volunteers for all the many other functions and activities.

So here we are today, having our annual meeting to elect Board Officers, Governors, and Nominating Committee, and to approve the financial budget for the coming fiscal year.

As we do so, there is a particular excitement in the air, as we anticipate venturing forward with our new minister, the Reverend C. J. McGregor, who will join us on May 1st. We are entering a new phase of our journey, one that will be enriched by his focus on inspiring us with his sermons, providing pastoral care, community outreach, and establishing meaningful relationships.

What a joy it is to be a part of this extended family, one that plays together, and also works together, not only for our own benefit, but also for others. Our family is indeed blessed, with deep understanding, compassion, and love - all of which are transmitted each and every day in so many wonderful ways.

Many of our people encounter daily struggles, dealing with hardships and deprivations, yet you are there to help them whenever you can.

Many troubling issues arise, that need to be addressed thoughtfully, and you are there to listen, to learn, and to lead in finding better solutions.

Many times we laugh and cry together, and you are there to reassure us that it's OK to expose our innermost feelings.

Our spiritual journeys advance – filled with opportunities and hope. When we leave here each Sunday, we should feel inspired and motivated to be proactive participants in creating a more just, compassionate and loving world beyond these doors.

We should contemplate and integrate the messages we hear, and let them guide us in all the decisions that we make.

We should sustain the outstanding courage that has facilitated our history, as actively engaged, liberal, and loving human beings, who embrace diversity. Our world desperately needs this vision, this enlightened consciousness, that variety enriches our lives, so that we can overcome the destructive voices of separation, alienation, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and domination.

Finally, we should express our gratitude, for being a part of something beautiful, giving thanks to the universe, for granting these special gifts of friendship, fellowship and family, that we are blessed to find here ...because All Faiths matters!

Salaam, Shalom, Namaste, Peace be upon You!

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