



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Finding the Unity in Community”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Behold, how good and pleasant it is for kindred to dwell together in unity! Psalm 133:1

If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. African proverb

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much. Helen Keller

Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers. Howard Thurman

Sermon

I'm sure it comes as no surprise that I like stories. Nor should it surprise you that I believe stories are not just for kids. Stories are rich with layers we can peel away to discover something new about ourselves or the world. Stories open us to greater empathy and emotional connection with another's circumstances. They engage our own personal stories and engage our hearts, hands, as well as our heads.

In the African folktale I told earlier, Hyena is like many of us. She lives isolated from others in her house. Whether we live in a high-rise apartment on top of one another, on a grand estate with miles of land between us, or more likely something in between, few of us know our neighbors. We experience a distance either social or geographic, or both. Unlike in times past, we have little need to know our neighbors. We have no need to rely on one another for safety from external threats. If we need a cup of sugar or an egg, we more often run to the store rather than to our next door neighbor. We likely worship in different places and our work typically takes us out of our neighborhoods. What need have we for neighbors?

Instead, the communities we choose to live in are self-selected. We get in our cars and come here. We seek a refuge of liberal religious values here that we cannot find elsewhere. Here we get to know like-minded people, knowing we don't have to hide who we are here. Knowing we are respected for who we are, who we love, whatever our means, whatever our first language, and even whatever our politics, though we sometimes forget we are not of one party. We're most like Hare when we come here, seeking to be surrounded by this community of friends.

Some of you may actually have relationships with those in your geographic neighborhood. If you do, I wonder if those neighbors are like you. Are they like your racial identity, be it white, black, brown, or other? Are they like you in age or family status? Are they like you in socio-economic class, educational background, political persuasion, or other identity? My guess is that on the whole, they are like you in most ways. We are most comfortable with people who are like us, whose culture we share.

Culture is made up of the beliefs, customs, values, ways of thinking and being, etc., of a particular society or group, place, or time. A culture shapes the behavior of the people within it and distinguishes one group from another. If you travel overseas, cultural differences are very noticeable. I remember when I went to Romania with fellow UUFA members two years ago, our reaction to the lack of accommodation for people with mobility challenges showed me that Americans expect equal accessibility for all. Cultures differ in regard to the amount of body space we're comfortable with. No one likes to feel someone is in their space, we clash when our space needs differ. Mealtimes and food expectations differ from culture to culture, too.

As a member of American white culture, I have certain expectations that someone in a different racial group in the U.S. might have. About ten years ago when I briefly stayed on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation one summer for a work mission, I learned about the importance of family over all else to the Lakota Sioux people. They let their houses fall into disrepair because they value their houses less than their relationships. This recognition helped me question my own values and priorities. Unfortunately, the clash of cultures—red and white—on the reservations has created a host of social and economic problems, many of which could have been avoided had earlier Euro-Americans held more respect for Indian culture.

Not every aspect of a particular culture might be one we wish to promote, but we need to understand each other before we can begin to judge, and before we can begin to benefit from each other's insights and traditions.

Hare brought animals together for a common purpose – to build houses and create a community. To celebrate the new community Hare invited the animals to contribute something to eat for the party. When we come together in community we each bring something to the proverbial party. Just like at a potluck dinner, nothing is guaranteed. You never know what people will bring or if we'll like it. But if we are willing to sample what's offered, we might be pleasantly surprised. Just like a potluck can challenge our tastes, different people from different cultures challenge our norms and expectations. And that makes multi-cultural embrace difficult.

For two months now we've been hearing about events in Ferguson, Missouri. It's become apparent that Ferguson's police department consists almost exclusively of white people, yet whites make up a miniscule part of the black-majority community. It's no surprise that cultures have clashed. It's no surprise that black residents of Ferguson feel angry, targeted, and disenfranchised. I feel for the entire community, black and white, and I hope these events can trigger, not more violence, but a coming together of different groups in the community to seek changes that will improve the lives of everyone who lives there.

Watching and reflecting on the ongoing events in Ferguson has forced me to reflect on our community here in Athens. Does every culture here bring something to Athens to make it good for everyone? Would Hare be proud of our greater Athens community, or are we a separate set of communities living side by side, but miles apart?

African-American sociologist George Yancey at the University of North Texas observes in his book, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, America has tried to manage racial tension and bring about healing in four ways, moving from one method into the next: colorblindness, Anglo-conformity, multiculturalism, and white responsibility. Let me explain these four before moving to Yancey's alternative.

Colorblindness demands that we ignore differences and accept that we're all alike; we're all human with the same needs and hopes. Although biologists have shown there is no useful genetic basis for racial differences,* pretending to be blind to color denies our different cultures and denies that color shapes our experiences and thus who we are. What it really means to be color *blind* is to see and act as if we are all *one* color—white, the dominant culture. That realization leads to Anglo-conformity.

Anglo-conformity demands people of color lose their identity in order to assimilate into the larger white culture. Proponents of this claim America was founded by white northern Europeans and built to its present greatness by whites, so America should be a white culture. So much for the Native Americans who were here first, and the Africans, southern and eastern Europeans, and Asians who made significant contributions to the building of this country. If and when one culture recognizes another culture has worth, and when historically less dominant cultures assert themselves, multiculturalism because more likely.

Multiculturalism demands we embrace different cultures and recognize their value. We claim to 'welcome diversity.' But we aren't racially very diverse. To be truly welcoming and multicultural we must know our own culture. Most of us are members of the dominant racial group and that makes it difficult for us to recognize our own operating cultural mode. Until we understand fully how we act white or black or purple, then multiculturalism is limited, too.

This limitation has led some whites to accept full responsibility for racial tension in the US. Many whites feel guilty for having mistreated non-white people throughout history. But sole *white responsibility* is also a dead end towards reconciliation between racial groups because it denies that people of color share some responsibility in devolving relationships.

Yancy believes if we take a fifth option, *mutual responsibility*, only then can we create the beloved community. I agree. We must each own our responsibility in making things right between groups.

It will take all of us, all colors, to come to bring all our gifts to the same table to create community. If whites deny any responsibility in creating unequal communities and opportunities for non-whites, we will get nowhere in race relations. Yet if whites take all the blame and are expected to fix it for everyone, then we will still get no closer to the beloved community we want. Blacks, whites, reds, and others must accept responsibility and jointly choose to build bridges between our cultures and communities.

I had a recent opportunity to help build a bridge. I was invited to give the invocation at the UGA Black Faculty and Staff Organization's annual awards luncheon. I received the invitation by email. I was pleased, but surprised because, obviously, I'm not black. But the group reached across our cultural divide to include me in their program. I made some new connections there as a result.

My connections to UGA have helped me cross divides on other occasions, as has my involvement in social justice activities because of this Fellowship. I'm proud of the activities

many of you engage in to cross cultural bridges in Athens. Many of us reach across brown and black and red borders, taking mutual responsibility to improve relations.

But there is more each of us can do. We'll be hosting the Economic Justice Coalition's 'Justice Fest' in November. We'll be participating again in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Monday worship service. Held here last year, it will be at a local AME church this coming January. I hope to see you at both these events actively reaching across to create new or stronger relationships.

The health of our collective community depends upon our willingness to get uncomfortable with people outside our culture, whatever our identity may be. May we not see Ferguson when we look in our city mirror. May we find the unity in our community. May we be like Hare and bring everyone together. May it be so.

***NOTE:** Humans are 99.9% genetically identical. Within the remaining .1%, 85% are differences which occur *within* a particular geographic group. We are more alike than we are different. Dr. Spencer Wells who heads the Geographic Project, a non-profit joint venture of the National Geographic Society and IBM, says,

“Racism is not only socially divisive, but also scientifically incorrect. We are all descendants of people who lived in Africa recently,” he says. “We are all Africans under the skin.” The kinds of differences that people notice, such as skin pigmentation, limb length, or other adaptations are “basically surface features that have been selected for in the environment. When you peer beneath the surface at the underlying level of genetic variation, we are all much more similar than we appear to be. There are no clear, sharp delineations.” <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/05/race-in-a-genetic-world-html>

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What gift of community do you receive from UUFA and how do you receive it?
2. Do you feel UUFA is more like one or many communities? Please share your experience.
3. What bridges have been difficult for you to cross and why? What helps you cross them?