



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Illusion of Other”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

*Let us have concord with our own people and concord with people who are strangers to us;
May we unite in our minds, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the divine spirit within us.*
Hindu ‘Athrava Veda’ 7.52:1-2

*All ye under the heaven! Regard heaven as your father, earth as your mother,
and all things as your brothers and sisters.* Shinto ‘Oracle of the Kami of Atsuta’

*When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly,
God is the electricity that surges between them.* Martin Buber (1878-1965)

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness. Thich Nhat Hanh

Sermon

Last weekend I officiated at a wedding ceremony. The wedding couple is not active in a religious community, in part because of their diverse backgrounds. The bride’s family members are observant Christians, though her father less so. Her parents are no longer married and his girlfriend is an Asian American Buddhist. The bride is Italian American. The groom’s family members are observant Muslims and Indian Americans.

Our friends in the ‘Klezmer Local 42’ band played music for the ceremony. Klezmer music originated with Eastern European Jews.

Picture this: Muslim groom, Christian bride, UU officiant, Jewish band, and at least one Buddhist in the crowd. There were white faces, black faces, brown faces, yellow faces, and maybe even some red faces that weren’t caused by the outdoor sun. Yet we were all gathered to celebrate the love of a particular couple known to us all.

Love melted away our differences. Love overcame any separateness.

Twentieth century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in his groundbreaking book *I and Thou*, outlined a religious philosophy that describes relationships as either dialogic or monologist.

To be in dialogue means each person is fully and equally engaged with another in open, ethical relationship, an I-Thou relationship. In contrast, a monologue relationship means one person is detached from the other and treats the other as an object for their own utility. Buber called this an I-It relationship.

Buber's personal experience and understanding of Hasidic Judaism inspired him to develop this philosophy, but it shares ideas with other faith traditions. Buddhism speaks of being mindful, of being fully present to another. Buber would see this as an I-Thou presentness. In Hindu tradition, "Namaste," is spoken when encountering another. This generally means "The divine in me greets the divine in you." Vedic Hinduism understands that every person is a part of one divine being or existence and we are all a reflection of each other's divinity. To be in a relationship where you see the divinity in others is to be in an I-Thou relationship. Buber's concept of I-Thou also expresses the ideal of Unitarian Universalism's First Principle which urges us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Buber also believed that every I-Thou relationship included a meeting with or experience of God. God is the place we meet in relationship. Whether you bring God into the concept of I-Thou or not, Buber was expressing that something is happening in the exchange between people which brings us together and dissolves our separateness. At the recent wedding it was shared love.

Consider your own relationships. When you stand before someone you love, gazing into their eyes, caressing their cheek, or even just being beside them, you know you have a connection. Buber called this the electricity of God moving between the two of you. We can't prove God or love exists like you can prove gravity, but you know something does exist between you because you feel differently for this person than you do with a stranger or mere acquaintance. What happens between you is a reciprocal meeting, an I-Thou relationship.

Lovers are not the only ones to have I-Thou relationships. Friendship may not be as intense as that with a lover, but there is something that exists beyond and between you because it is a mutual relationship.

An I-It relationship is not mutual. It is one-way and utilitarian. When I ride a bus and give my fare to the driver, I'm treating that driver as an It. When I label this person 'Driver' I categorize him or her and this distances me from him or her because I am 'not Driver'. I have objectified the person and probably made some unconscious assumptions about this person.

Buber tried to make clear in his later writings that he was not necessarily prioritizing one type of relationship over the other. To function in our world we shift back and forth from I-Thou to I-It as circumstances warrant. We just need to be careful that we shift appropriately. If a lover was unwillingly treated like a prostitute, the relationship would be in trouble. Sadly, prostitutes are objectified by their pimps and by most of their clients. Women in many patriarchal societies become commodities bought and sold as brides or sex slaves. Often there is little difference. The abducted girls in Nigeria are an extreme example.

When you and I objectify others because they seem different, it becomes easy for us to treat them differently, too. Stereotyping an entire group can result from objectification.

I learned this truth first hand while in seminary because I was required to immerse myself in a cross-cultural experience. For two weeks I went to live among the homeless along the Route 1 corridor of Alexandria, Virginia, just outside Washington, DC. I was a bit anxious because Route 1 is well-known for its many problems. For example, this area sees more pedestrians hit by cars than in any other in the DC area because many people are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, as well as being mentally ill. They accidentally wander out into the streets and get hit. Overcrowded shelters and mission churches try to serve the needs of these folks, but there are too many for the available resources.

While immersing myself in their world, I slept on the floor of a church in a sleeping bag. I showered at a county recreation center. I spent my time eating and working at a mission church's clothing and food bank, and attending brief, daily worship services. If you went to the service you received a free evening meal.

The church had a van and I helped deliver food to shut-ins who had no way to get to stores and no money to pay for food even if they could get there. I sat down and shared meals at the mission with those who had no other place to go and might get no other meal. The people I encountered willingly shared their stories with me. One couple became homeless because the husband was injured on the job and then he lost his job. With no income they lost their home, car, and ability to bounce back. Others I met were suffering from untreated mild to severe mental illness, others were dealing with addictions. Their stories made me realize how quickly life can turn against a person and how easy it could be for anyone to slide into homelessness.

I also interviewed local police, county workers who ran the shelters and half-way houses, and several ministers from the churches along the corridor who coordinated food programs and social opportunities for those in need.

My experience helped me see that the people I met were no different than me. They wanted what I wanted – a good home, a good job, and a safe neighborhood to live in. I learned how little low-income housing was available and how the county's teachers, civil servants, and unskilled laborers couldn't afford to live where they worked. But most significantly for me, I began to put names on the faces of those I had once labeled 'homeless'. I could no longer treat people I had come to know as anything but I-Thou.

We tend to treat those we don't know, those who are different from ourselves as 'other'. Whenever we label someone we objectify them. I'm sure like me you've stereotyped some people in these categories: pagan, fundamentalist, Democrat, Republican, dropout, addict, soldier, felon, feminist, 'illegal' immigrant, and homeless to name a few. But when we objectify people into groups we cannot be in equal relationship with them. 'They' and 'them' separate us and deny the 'we'. And when someone is not a part of us, it becomes easy to abuse and exclude. That is not only harmful to them, but to us because we eliminate those whom we might otherwise be in meaningful relationship with. And, when we dismiss people as being other, we act contrary to our First and Seventh Principles—to affirm each person's worth and that we are all connected and interdependent.

When we have real, I-Thou relationships, we leave behind all preconceptions and reservations about someone, which allows us to be in real dialogue with one another, to be in open, honest relationships. And when that happens, we discover we have more in common than we have different. Like with optical illusions, sometimes we just need to see differently to create I-Thou relationships. Homeless people are just people without a home. And they are part of us. This Fellowship includes people who live on the edge and in the margins and if we truly welcome diversity, we will recognize they *belong* here. As do Republicans, Theists, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered, plus Straights, Democrats, and others.

At my recent wedding ceremony, although I named differences among us, we were all the same. We were just individuals who had come to celebrate a love between two people. And that made us one. And when we come together here each Sunday or on any other day, we come as one community, and no person should be treated without respect, no matter how different you think they are from you.

Let's do that right now. Take a minute to greet your neighbor, someone you don't know. Say Hello or Namaste. Exchange names. Then when the service is over, engage that person in further conversation.

(Pause while congregation greets one another)

The 16th century founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania, Francis David, reportedly said "We don't have to think alike to love alike." We can love one another, respect one another, and form I-Thou relationships with each other, no matter what our beliefs or self-identity. Love can bridge our differences and enable us to see the humanity and the divinity in all people. The world is too complex and interesting for us to shut ourselves off from those who seem different or from those we would label.

May we have the courage to enter into dialogue and make a new friends with those we may think are 'other'. May we always see each other with love.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What cultural practices seem most 'foreign' to you or contribute to a sense of 'otherness'?
2. In what way do people who are unlike you challenge you? How do you bridge the gap with people who seem different from you? Who would you like to know better?
3. In what way is the 7th Principle (*see back cover*) affirmed among people in your daily life?