Wisdom from the Margins
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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I understand the sermon to be a conversation. I know, I know, I’m the only one talking right now. Nevertheless, it is a conversation I am having – an ongoing conversation with the community and with what is going on in the congregation and in the world. When any particular sermon falls short – and they consistently do- because there’s always more to say about any particular topic, I comfort myself with the thought that “there’s always next Sunday!” I hope you find that a comfort as well.

So it was, as I was preaching last time – that would be two weeks ago. Last Sunday was community Sunday which is an entirely different thing, but two weeks ago I preached a sermon called “Life Blessing” and though I love the sermon, probably because it features my grandfather, whom I loved, I also noticed that it took all three examples from dead white men. Well, one was fictional (the character Wally Shawn from the movie My Dinner with André) – so I don’t know if that’s alive or dead, but my grandfather has died as has Henry David Thoreau, my other two examples. And that is not uncommon for me, or for the larger world in which I live, for us to use the experience of white men as normative, and dead white mean as authoritative. To compare our lives to theirs, whether or not we’re male or white, and to consider their lives and experience as the ideal or the norm, either one. The exceptions are experiences of women or non-binary individuals, or people of color or gay, or Buddhist – our society – and so many of us – think of those as the exceptions. The margins. Thoreau in the center and the author of our reading this morning, Leslie Takahashi, at the margin.

Though her point is that we need to shed this either/or categorization and learn to see the fractions, the spectrum, and the complexity. That is harder to do when you reside in the center. Let me say that again, it is harder to do when you live in the center.

People in the margins have to learn more than one culture. They must learn the ways of those in the center, those in power, those considered “normative” or “authoritative” and, they grow up learning the ways of their people, the people of their group – whatever the category – in the margins. If, however, we reside in the center, we don’t have to venture to the margins. We already hold the power and the authority and standard of normal. We only peek at the margins if we get in relationship with someone out there, or are curious, or adventurous, or bored with the center. And we’re less likely to visit the margins if we’re feeling under attack by those at the border. We might want to stay safely tucked into the center. And if we can’t see over there, we might not ever learn that anything other than the center even exists, or is of value.

My personal moment of clarity came – and I’ve told you this anecdote before – but as the congregation in Lansing, MI was preparing to hold worship in the gymnasium of the local Islamic Center, the membership coordinator and I were meeting with the Imam in preparation. This was early in 2016 and the man who was to become president – whom we all expected would not become president – had been making Islamophobic statements and hate crimes against Muslims and people of color was on the rise and the membership coordinator and I, both white women, expressed our deep embarrassment to the Pakistani born imam about the intolerance that was being expressed. We were shocked. We were not in denial about racism but were also not confronted with it personally on a daily basis. The imam’s reaction was different – he told us he was glad the racism was out in the open. From his vantage point in the margins, he knew it was there all along – it was we who reside in the center, who were not fully in touch with the hate experienced by minorities in this country.
This is a conversation our country is having right now, and one our larger association of Unitarian Universalists is having right now. Whether it’s the issue of immigration or hiring practices, it comes down to the question of whose experience do we value, whose lives matter, and whether or not the foundational claims of our country and our religion – not unrelated entities – still hold true. These claims that this is a country and a faith where ALL are welcome. That diversity is a blessing not a curse. What we’re learning at this moment in time, of course, is that our interpretation of these foundational claims are not everyone’s interpretation, and that the narrative we’ve constructed over the years intentionally ignored evidence to the contrary – the prejudices of the founding fathers of both the country and this religion. Because those who founded the country and the American version of this faith were from the center, we did not take into account all the ways in which those in the margins were overlooked, dismissed, or hurt. Certainly, we liked to portray ourselves as the outliers, the heretics, the radical revolutionaries – and there’s truth to that, but there is also truth in the fact that white men have held the center of power in both this country and our religion – up to this point.... It feels like this grand experiment to me – that if this faith tradition can do the work we are trying so hard to complete, we may be able to help the country out of the terrifying mess we have been complicit in creating.

And so..... I have found power in the Intercultural Development Continuum. When I was in the Peace Corps in the late eighties, we called it the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity – we had what was then called Cultural Sensitivity Training. And in recent years the UUA has pulled out this model to help us as individual ministers and congregations develop more skill in the area of change and difference and diversity. It is a model that works with all kinds of difference. We used it successfully with that congregation in Michigan as they went through enormous changes moving from an inadequate building near the Michigan State University campus to a very useable space – with room to grow – in an immigrant neighborhood with car dealerships and racial and economic diversity. It worked to help us prepare for the change of a move. Well, first, to understand the different opinions people had about where we were first located and what to do about the inadequate building – the congregation was split just about 50/50 in its desire to stay where they were and to move – and so this model helped half the congregation of one opinion understand the other half with the opposite opinion, then it helped us prepare to be good neighbors in the new location, where very few of the moving congregation actually lived. Of course, some congregants did live in that neighborhood and they had felt marginalized all along in the other location – all of a sudden we were moving to their center, and it was a fascinating change.

So, let me introduce you to the Intercultural Development Continuum. It is a continuum because – here’s the good news – we can learn to develop an intercultural mindset, no matter what our life experience has taught us so far. Since this is a conversation, may I ask those of you familiar with this continuum to raise your hands? That’s helpful. Since there is expertise in the room – and there always is – no matter what I preach about, someone in the room knows more about the topic than I do – which is another reason the sermon is a conversation.

Here are the developmental stages of this continuum – and even though development is possible, it is not a given. But the first stage is denial – where we just don’t see difference. We don’t even notice it. Have you even had a conversation with someone who says, “I know just what you mean!” and then they tell you a story that indicates a complete misunderstanding of your point? Or perhaps you know a family or grew up in a family in which the obvious sexual orientation or sexual identity of a child was not noticed, recognized or seen? That’s denial.

Polarization is when we know differences exist, but we categorize them all as either good or bad. I think of countries such as Uganda where it has been illegal for men to have sex with men since 1894, and the penalty is life imprisonment or execution. The minister of the UU Church of Kampala, Uganda, Mark Kiyimba was in the news a few years ago for opposing these anti-homosexuality laws. [And I think my mind is on this issue today.
because it’s Pride. Nobody from here organized a church group to attend the parade today, but I hope this will be the last year we say that.]

Polarization is when we judge differences as good or bad. Good versus evil. Male versus female, Old versus young, Gay versus straight. Polarization is when we say we can tell someone is honest when they look you in the eye. We know that some people don’t look others directly in the eye, but we don’t acknowledge that it could be a sign of respect or something other than “avoiding the truth.” We place a judgement on it that categorizes it in that either/or polarization.

Minimization is when we know the differences exist, but we minimize the impact or degree of those differences. This is largely where the world of Unitarian Universalism has lived, and where our country has been. The statistics show that most people are in a stage of minimization. We acknowledge differences, but we minimize them. Those at the margins minimize difference in order to get along with those in power in the center, and those in the center minimize difference because they are surrounded by others in the center and hold most of the power. The examples of difference are marginalized and thus not seen or valued as much.

I like to call the blue hymnal – the hymnal I grew up with as a UU. Hymns for the Celebration of Life— I sometimes call it the minimization hymnal. It extols the kind of Universalism that says we are all really the same underneath. While we do share a common humanity, the emphasis of what we share understates the differences. And, since most of the UU’s in the center of our movement were white straight cisgender men, this minimization marginalized all those whose identities differed. I want to emphasize this point that most Americans and most American Unitarian Universalists are in the developmental stage of minimization.

Acceptance is when we really understand difference. We recognize it when someone from a different culture uses eye contact differently and we don’t judge it as dishonest or disrespectful. We understand that there are different theologies among those seated here today – that some of you wish I’d talk about God more and others wish I never referred to that concept and opinions ranging wide in between. Acceptance is when we don’t judge those whose theological opinion is different from our own. We accept that people draw different conclusions from their study and life experience.

Adaptation occurs when not only do we accept differences, but we can adapt to them. So, for example, when speaking with someone whose personal space is different than our own – that is often a cultural difference – we can notice our discomfort because our partner in conversation is closer or further than feels “normal” but we can keep ourselves from moving to make ourselves more comfortable, allowing our partner in conversation to have their space, so to speak. Or adaptation could be a male person covering his head when entering a synagogue or a woman covering her head when entering a mosque, not because they are Jewish or Muslim, but to show respect for the people and their house of worship. Adapting is doing something differently when in the environment of others who do things differently, in order to connect or lessen the tension among the differences. And let me complicate that example, because adaptation isn’t really about the action – the covering of the head. It is about the consciousness with which one makes the choice. Someone in adaptation could just as easily choose not to cover their head when entering said house of worship. They might make that choice on a different set of values, but the reason they are in adaptation as a developmental stage is because they understand the implications of their choice and they’re choosing. Adaptation is about having the choice to adapt to difference. In the other stages of development, choice is not present, because one is in denial or polarized, one has minimized the difference or accepted it, but can’t adapt their actions to it. Does that make sense?
Difference can be hard. You may have experienced a little of that difficulty this morning with the hymns. That was intentional. To sing in other languages or to sing in a pentatonic scale. I know that it has taken me longer to adjust to the culture that is the UU Church of Vancouver – it’s a little deceptive, you know, because I was raised UU and somehow I feel like I “know” unitarian universalist churches. I know the Cougar fight song, so I feel like I “know” something about this place where WSU of the west resides. I grew up in Washington on the East side of the mountains, not the West. And the truth is, I’ve only been a minister at one other UU church and it was in the Midwest. All my other UU experiences were as a child or a lay person. And so it has taken me by surprise how hard it has been for me to learn how it is you do church here, and how different some things are than what I had grown used to there.

It’s been hard figuring out what to preach as I do consider the sermon a conversation with the people, and it takes time to get to know the people. I’ve known people much like you, but not you. Getting to know a new congregation is as hard for a minister as it is for a congregation to get to know a new minister – well, maybe even harder, given the numbers. It has only been this spring that I’ve begun to feel like I’m beginning to know what to say on Sundays, that I have a sense of the conversation going on within the congregation. A sermon like this one – remember there’s always next Sunday! - a sermon like this one which seems a bit more didactic in nature serves to help you understand my language and framework and for us to develop a common one so that we can deepen this relationship over time, and hopefully, together, move toward that intercultural mindset where we see diversity as the blessing it is. I believe that is what Unitarian Universalism is calling us to do right now. I also believe it will be the salvation of this country, if we can get to it.

_Benediction_

“Let us open our hearts to the complexity of our worlds. Let us make our lives sanctuaries, to nurture our many identities. The day is coming when all will know that the rainbow world is more gorgeous than monochrome, that the margins hold the center” Blessed are we who work to create the Beloved Community, who see our diversity as our greatest blessing.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.