

We Need Not Think Alike to Love Alike

Rev. Lisa Doege

August 29, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Welcome to part two in my series Unitarian Universalism in Two Easy Lessons. By the way, these are my two easy lessons. Just about each of my colleagues would have his or her own slightly or vastly different two part introductory series.

Just to review, the first lesson is wrapped up in a phrase from Unitarian minister Wallace Robbins: *we dare not fence the spirit*. My second lesson is just as easy. It's captured in another simple phrase. This one spoken some five hundred years ago, by a preacher named Francis David, who was theological advisor to that Unitarian Transylvanian king I mentioned in passing last week. David said, "*We need not think alike to love alike.*"

David's words are perhaps my favorite phrase from our history, with their radical message of love in the presence of diversity. It's a message I find a use for several times almost every day, in these times when acts of hatred in the presence diversity fill the news. But they're lesson number two in my UU catechism for a slightly different though related reason.

If someone asks me about Unitarian Universalism and I more or less successfully explain lesson number one, we dare not fence the spirit, the inevitable follow-up question is, how can you be one church, one religion, if you all believe different things? What keeps you together?

I've given any number of replies over the years. I've talked about our common history or our common exploratory approach to matters of the spirit. I've spent years trying to explain that most Unitarian Universalists are OK with the idea that there can be more than one right way, more than one right answer, so it's not as destructive as it might seem that we have lots of different beliefs in one congregation. None of these answers are very satisfying to my questioners. I think they distrust that last answer most of all. And I'm not sure I blame them. Human nature being what it is, it is a bit difficult to imagine a room full of folks calmly accepting the fact that they each hold a different belief about God or the nature of the universe or life and death, and each think his or her belief is the right one, and everyone is OK with thinking there might be two or three or four contradictory right beliefs right there in that very room. Such a thing is even

more difficult to believe when you imagine that the room is full of Unitarian Universalists. Face it. We do argue—all the time—about the great religious questions.

I think my old answers fail to satisfy the questioners and myself because they don't address the emotion behind the question. It's one thing to intellectually accept that there may be more than one right way in religion, to intellectually accept that truth may be found along different paths. But when I'm asked, why doesn't your church fall apart, I'm being asked a question about feeling, not intellect. And I get much better results when I answer in David's words, "*We need not think alike to love alike.*" Almost everyone understands loving someone with whom they bitterly disagree—a sibling or parent or child with differing politics, for example.

Yes, we have great differences in our beliefs. Yes, we disagree, argue, occasionally shout about them. But as deep is our conviction that we dare not fence the spirit so too is our conviction that we can love one another, that we must love one another, in the presence of our diversity. If we will not be restrained in our beliefs, if we dare not fence the spirit and yet desire to remain one, one congregation, one liberal faith, then we must have a enduring, life-giving bond, and I can think of none better than love.

Just a couple Sundays ago I heard a re-broadcast of a 2009 Speaking of Faith program on which about twenty American Moslems spoke about their experiences of Ramadan. Without exception they spoke of their love for that month long holiday, of the spiritual challenge and blessing of fasting, of their first fast--either as a child or a new convert. And of course each of them added his or her personal twist to the story. One Iraqi American spoke of fasting at college on a warm Texas day. A fellow Iraqi American Moslem had chosen not to fast and was flaunting her ice cream in the classroom. Another student also ate ice cream, but he, a Jewish guy, took it outside the classroom in order to not to eat in front of the fasting student. Love in action across diverse theologies and traditions.

Another young Moslem American giggled repeatedly as she told the story of her first fast. She was a sixth grader and quite eagerly anticipating her first full fast experience--sunup to sundown for thirty days. And then--the first sixth grade field trip of the year was schedule for the first day of Ramadan, a field trip that included a stop at McDonald's for lunch. Stung by the cruelty of fate and the calendar but committed to her faith, she sat in McDonald's watching her classmates eat, enduring some flaunted french fries held near her nose. Then as the class was preparing to leave the restaurant the manager approached her with two bags full of McDonald's fries and burgers and cokes. She said two men had bought them and sent them over. The generous men were wearing scrubs, the young Moslem recipient said as she giggled

again. “They might have been doctors and probably thought I didn’t have money to eat, or maybe that I had an eating disorder.” She gave away the burgers and cokes, and saved the fries to eat when she broke her fast that evening. There it is again. Love in action across diverse theologies and traditions.

On Ministry Day, prior to General Assembly this past June, one of my colleagues told of two people confronting one another across the ideological divide over abortion and reproductive rights at a rally. Angry words and gestures were exchanged. Days later they encountered one another again--in church, Unitarian Universalist church, church home to each of them--as one offered communion to the other. My colleague called that second meeting, that moment of love overcoming diversity, a holy time.

That’s what we strive for every day at church, such holy times when love triumphs in the midst of diversity. We say, all the time we say, that we come to the Unitarian Universalist church in order to be with people like us. But really our churches, our fellowships, our societies are filled with people not the least bit like us. People on the opposites side of the abortion debate. People with different politics. People with very divergent preferred practices and expressions of spirituality. Folks with different lifestyles, genders, affectional orientations, family structures, tastes in music, ice cream, barbecue.... We come to Unitarian Universalist churches in order to love in the presence of diversity and to celebrate that great Love which triumphs over diversity.

This weekend, when so many are remembering the March on Washington, and so many are grappling still with the racism unmasked five years ago by the winds of Katrina, this weekend it is good to remember that though we are not alone in our conviction that love has a healing, reconciling power beyond all comprehension, still that message must be spread far and wide. Still that message must be lived deeply, prayerfully, faithfully, day by day.

We dare not fence the spirit. We need not think alike to love alike. As a pair of statements that work together to point to the essence of our way in religion they’re hard to beat. The first hints at the courageous freedom and expansive openness that have long characterized Unitarian Universalism. The second speaks of love equal to freedom in its attraction, more powerful than fear in its claim on our hearts.

The UU World has been filled these recent years with samples of elevator speeches. Those short, concise statements Unitarian Universalists have honed over years of answering, when inquiring neighbors, friends, colleagues, children, siblings, strangers in the elevator want to know, just what is it your church is all about any way? I think

anyone's best elevator speech is one that comes from the heart. One that starts with the phrase, "Well, I believe...". Or, "I go to that church because...". But if you're on the spot, if you find yourself on an elevator before you get home from church today, or if your perspective in-laws quiz you about your religion before giving their blessing to your engagement, or the boss happens to mention he bought a flower from one of your church members at the airport the other day—go ahead and use these two easy lessons of Unitarian Universalism. You'll be OK.

We dare not fence the spirit. We need not think alike to love alike.

If you're completely hopeless at memorization, print the sermon titles out of the newsletter and stick 'em in your wallet. The words will be there when you need them. The meaning is already in your heart, waiting only to be reminded.

Amen.