

Just Who Do You Think You Are?
Rev. Dr. Richard Speck
February 19, 2017

It has been a while since I last preached a sermon here. I'm grateful to Rev. Roberta in granting me this privilege while she is away. It is rare for a minister who is a member of the congregation to fill the pulpit. I am reminded of the story about a preacher who trained his horse to go when he said, "Praise the Lord," and to stop when he said, "Amen." The preacher mounted the horse, said, "Praise the Lord" and went for a ride. When he wanted to stop for lunch, he said, "Amen." He took off again, saying, "Praise the Lord." The horse started going toward the edge of a cliff. The preacher got excited and said, "Whoa!" Then he remembered and said, "Amen," and the horse stopped at the edge of the cliff. The preacher was so relieved and grateful that he looked up to heaven and said, "Praise the Lord!" Hopefully, I'll remember the right words to say today.

Growing up, did your parents ever utter the phrase, "Just who do you think you are?" In my case it was with a little more emphasis and with a southern accent. "Just who the hell do you think you are, young man?" This phrase was used when I had stepped over some invisible line that marked the proper place for me in my family and society. I had violated my community of identity. I was the first of my family to go to college and I had an expansive vocabulary that I liked to use. This would get me in trouble. My two older brothers had only finished high school. My middle brother would use this phrase when he thought I was getting too big for my britches and wanted to bring me down a notch.

I was becoming different than my family who were steeped in the ways of the south with segregation as I was realizing that the system of segregation was wrong. I was evolving and growing in understanding who my community of identity was. I was shifting in my identity and the community to which I belonged. As I deepened my knowledge about what makes us human, I sought out a community where my new identity would be accepted and supported. It was in that search that I discovered Unitarian Universalism over forty years ago.

Have any of you experienced something like that in your life? You were gaining wisdom about the world and came to the conclusion that your current community of identity wasn't quite right for you anymore. You felt that you didn't fit in any more, but weren't quite sure where you did fit in.

The story for all ages has a little dragon that doesn't fit in to his community. He's different. When he couldn't make fire like the other dragons, some thought he should be excluded from the community. They said, "You're different – you're not like us." But he had a talent that no one else could do in commanding his sparks to form letters. He used his talents to spell out "Extraordinary I am." His mother accepted his difference and so did the rest of the community.

But this doesn't always have a happy ending when you are different. I have met plenty of people who didn't have the community accepting them for who they were. Some were gay or lesbian who were cut off from their families. Others were men and women who married a person from a different racial group and were excluded from their spiritual communities just for loving someone who looked different. Some were thrown out because they didn't believe the same things about their God.

Our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers understood that being different can result in persecution, abandonment, and even death. Michael Servetus challenged the concept of the

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trinity in Christianity. His exploration of the scriptures did not find any concrete evidence for the idea of a three part god. His writings were branded as heresies by both the Catholic and Reform Churches and he was put in jail and eventually burned at the stake. But his ideas lived on and formed the cornerstone of Unitarianism in Europe.

John Murray, father of American Universalism, had angry mobs trying to silence his message of a loving God who would not condemn humanity to everlasting punishment in hell. When a stone came crashing through the window where he was preaching barely missing his head, John Murray picked it up and held it in his hand. "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable nor convincing." Putting it down, he continued, "Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth."

I have also met people who used to be part of a Unitarian Universalist community but who are not now. I would meet them at events where I was known as a Unitarian Universalist minister. They would approach me and engage in conversation. After a while, they would get around to telling me their story. The basic theme was that each of these people felt that they had not been accepted for who they were in their fullest humanity. Some felt that they couldn't hold to a liberal Christianity because the congregation was too humanist and dismissed anyone who believed in Jesus as fooling themselves. Others found that they couldn't hold conservative political views and be accepted by those who bashed any and all politics that weren't liberal or progressive.

As many of you know, this congregation has been rejuvenating itself over the past couple of years. I see us trying to live out our faith of inclusivity with any who will come and join us. We are reaching out into the larger world to proclaim and act on our values that uplift the human spirit and build a community of love and justice. And as a result of our efforts I think we are attracting new members in greater numbers. We are walking the talk in presenting our faith to the greater community that surrounds us. We are being noticed by some of the movers and shakers of Wilmington, New Castle, and Delaware for our actions promoting black lives, youth aging out of foster care, and cultivating peace.

Our identity as a community with solid values is spreading outward. Each of us contributes to that identity by our presence and participation in this congregation. And as I have got to know many of you, I have discovered a rich tapestry of faith. We are not monolithic by any stretch of the imagination.

We have immigrants who came to this country after World War II. We have veterans who fought in that war. We have members who hold liberal political views as well as those who hold conservative ones. We have straight white males like me and gay and lesbian couples raising beautiful kids in our religious exploration classes. We have families without children and single adults. We have teachers, musicians, sales clerks, scientists, people with three degrees and people with high school diplomas. We are a rainbow of colors when it comes to skin tone. I have met atheists, agnostics, theists, Buddhists, liberal Christians, and some who encompass all of the above. I think that each of these different items makes us stronger, not weaker.

In the material for small group study for this month is an introductory page. The material is urging us to live complete lives of being who we are and not a partial slice of our total being. I was struck by a couple of passages: "We don't just want people to be honest about their contradictions; we want them to see those contradictions as great gifts! Bottom line: we want our congregations to be places where you don't have to pretend." "Our faith wants you to stop hiding and live fully, not just for your sake, but for our sake as well. We are all struggling to

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escape our slices and connect to our hidden wholeness. Seeing you be real gives us permission to let our true self out of the dark! Your brave honesty about your contradictions, allows us to proudly strut around in our multitudes! We save each other by being true to ourselves.”

Can you imagine what this congregation would be like if each of us were to live our true selves? Can you see the richness that would ensue as we shared our whole selves with one another in an open and honest way? While it might be a little scary at first as I shared my hidden parts with you and you did the same with me, we will become closer in feelings for one another through our sharing.

I grew up in the segregated south. I never met a peer student of color until I was in college. I never kissed a woman of color until I was in my forties. I never understood what it meant to be gay until I became friends with a gay colleague. I expanded my understanding about transgender people when I got to know them in one of our churches. Each time, my understanding of myself became enriched through my interaction with people who were not like me on the surface, but were just like me when I got to know them.

I believe that this is what being a community of identity can be. As Unitarian Universalists we are asked to bring who we are into a community that affirms and loves us just for being that authentic self. We mix and mingle, going deeper in our bonds of friendship, discovering more similarities as well as unique aspects of our lives. We do this not just on Sunday morning but in other activities throughout the weeks and months. That is why I love the Circle Dinners that we offer. In those more intimate settings where we break bread together, sometimes gluten free, we get a larger glimpse into the lives of people we might never encounter outside of church. I learn things about fellow members that increase my connections to them and our faith.

In this world where fear of the other is rising, where diversity is being challenged, where there are calls to build walls that shut people out, our inclusive faith is needed more than ever. Edwin Markham wrote a short poem in the early part of the Twentieth Century that still has relevance for us today. He called it “Outwitted.”

“He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!”

Being a community that is drawing an ever wider circle has been the hallmark of our faith since the beginning. My colleague, Doug Taylor, reminds us that being alone in today’s world is scary. With so much injustice in our land still needing to be righted, with so much hatred to be overcome, with so much sorrow and hurt in our lives, we need a community where we can be our true selves.

He said that he “came into community, a religious community of hope and love.” In that community he received support, energy, power, shared witness, compassion, wisdom, grace, encouragement, depth, and diversity. And together we can change the world. Together, we make life sweeter. Together, we save lives, our own and others.

I’m proud to claim the faith of Unitarian Universalism. I know we are not perfect. I know that we still have issues that we need to work through. But, just like Churchill who said “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others,” our faith is the worst form of religion, except for all the others.

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So who do you think you are? I know that we are not everyone's idea of a community of identity. But I also know that I have found a religious community that celebrates my uniqueness and calls forth the best in me to add my efforts to creating the beloved community. I'm proud to call this my religious home. Amen.