

***On Culture and Adaptation***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
July 14, 2024

***Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby***

Like many people here, I've been interested in issues related to racism, sexism and class differences for most of my life. There's always more to learn in the pursuit of deeper understanding.

Two friends and I who share an interest in social justice started an exploration based on a model of cultural understanding that's depicted as an iceberg. The top of the iceberg, what's visible, includes language, appearance and clothing. Often it's all we really know about people around us.

My friends and I focused on our cultural similarities and differences that aren't apparent—part of the culture iceberg that's under water. So for the past year, we've met most weeks to share what shapes our beliefs, attitudes, values, cultural norms. How we handle emotions and attitudes toward children and elders, education, time and health.

I expected there would be some surprises among the three of us, and I was right about that. Many experiences that I considered "normal" were not shared by my friends. The concept of "normal" is driven by so many more factors than I realized.

It turns out, for example, that one friend and I had completely different family reactions to us signing up for a typing class when we were teenagers. I was an outlier in my family, interested in books and writing. Some of my relatives, who warned me of the perils of being an egghead, thought going to college would be a waste of money and that I should focus on getting an office job. When I signed up for a typing class, a couple of people said, basically, "Finally, she's learning something useful." I was annoyed, not because I had anything against secretarial work, but because my plans to go to college were being devalued yet again.

My friend, meanwhile, shared that her father encouraged her to take a typing class in high school. Why? So she would be prepared for success when she wrote papers in college. Her father went with loving encouragement; two of my family members chose to mock me even though they supported my decision to take the class. No wonder people have such different responses to all sorts of situations—our lives are filled with lots and lots of vastly different bottom-of-the-iceberg experiences.

Our three-person discussion group gives us a deeper understanding of cultural differences, which is valuable, and I recommend it. The experience also gives us a greater gift, which is a deeper level of trust and friendship. I'll treasure that forever.

**Introduction to Guest Speaker**

We've invited Siobhana McEwen, Executive Director of Southwest Washington Equity Coalition, to speak to us this morning - as it says on their website:

“In 2016, community leaders and organizations came together to address the real fear of racialized violence throughout southwest Washington and in Clark County.

“What transpired was an opportunity to collectively organize to address overt racism expressed in U.S. national rhetoric and policy, and how it manifests in southwest Washington at the local level.”

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver, as a minority religion, was invited to the table early on. However, we have had a hard time finding a representative from this congregation to participate in a meaningful way. Rev. Kathryn, Heather Beecher, and Betty Montgomery have all been involved but we’re currently seeking a new person interested in this work. If this is something you might be interested in, please speak to one of them.

Siobhana, thank you for being here this morning and telling us about this organization.

### **Remarks from Siobhana McEwan**

Thank you Reverend Bert, and the congregation, for the invitation to be here today. I do want to tell you a bit about SWEC, but first, I want to share a little bit about myself.

I grew up in a very, very small town in rural Nebraska. My high school class had about 75 students, and the majority of us grew up on ranches in the countryside surrounding our town. Through the 80s, there were three major employers in the town: a state college, the railroad, and the forest service. When BNSF pulled out of Chadron in the late 80s, the population dropped to right about 5,000, and though we were located right in the heart of the Oglala Sioux nation, the overwhelming majority of folks in town were white. In fact, the 2000 census shows that Chadron was, at the time, 93% white. I think it’s also important to share that, though we had a lot of “watering holes”, we had even more churches!

Growing up, I was the only 1.) queer, 2.) biracial, 3.) non-christian I knew. This is the kind of town where your folks know what you got in trouble for at school before you even got home, ok. Everyone knew everyone else’s business. And, I can promise you, folks were definitely praying for me and judging my sins on many, many a Sunday. But it was also the kind of place where, when I needed help, I knew I could go to any of my neighbors and get it. People might be praying for a neighbor on Sunday morning, but would be out helping them at a branding on Sunday afternoon. Where I grew up, mother nature was so harsh, so unforgiving, that we knew, as a community, that our survival was bound up in one another’s.

This concept of mutual survival is something that we think about a lot at SWEC, though we take it one step further. As Aboriginal educator, elder, and advocate Lilla Watson said, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Our vision for the future of our community is bright.

Today, the City of Vancouver is growing - bustling, you might say. Our city is nearly 30% people of color; Evergreen School District is just over 50% (I think it’s something like 50.6%) students of color, and VPS has several elementary schools that are teetering on being “minority-majority” schools. We have a growing and vibrant representation of people of color and culture who call Vancouver and Clark County home.

But we don't have adequate representation - not in politics, not in our schools, not in our businesses. So SWEC's mission - to advance racial equity across Southwest Washington - is important. As the only multi-racial organizing body in the community, we *have* to be successful in our mission to build bridges, elevate the voices of our communities, and work to ensure that our communities are centered in decision making across the community.

Though we only obtained our non-profit status in 2022, and have only had paid staff for 8 months, we've already been able to successfully build several programs, launch a 501c4 sister organization, and have our eyes set on further development and expansion in order to both amplify the voices of our communities of color, and also ensure that equitable policy is at the heart of local governance, local non-profits, and local corporations. The work we do is hollow without the support and guidance from community organizations, both grassroots and otherwise, and the UUCV has been a valued partner since our founding. As your congregation continues to grow in your own liberatory practices, I hope you'll be able to join us for our Membership Bloc meetings. I want to wrap up with a thank you to you all for your continued financial support, of course, but even more importantly, for the radical love you share with each other and with our community. Many thanks.

### **On Culture and Adaptation© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

*True love* by the Afro-Cuban all stars. Wasn't that fabulous? Music and dancing and drumming and language are aspects of culture we generally think of when we talk about culture, but there is so much more. It tends to be the aspects of culture we don't see that causes so much conflict between people, such as different family reactions to taking a typing class. We grow up in an environment and tend to assume that it's just the way things are, when in reality there are so many ways to be in this world. It can be especially painful if you grow up as a faerie who likes mud, or as a troll who likes tea. Or as the only queer, biracial, non-christian you know! What I love about this faith tradition is that we strive to affirm our differences, celebrate them and work toward greater understanding. And we got to this place honestly, as people whose beliefs were most often the heretical ones, the ones not adopted by the church in power. As those whose beliefs were rejected by the ruling class, we knew that our beliefs weren't wrong, just different. And so we have, at least in theology and theory, always known that more difference existed than those in power would admit. Especially in this polarized world, our work is here, at the level of culture and change.

Some of you will recognize this [slide](#). This is the continuum of development from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural one. The monocultural mindset is that one in which you believe your cultural understanding is universal and just the way it is. "Honest people look you in the eyes" is one such cultural belief that isn't universal but can be misunderstood as such if someone has limited experience in the world. When in **denial**, you just don't see difference. If someone doesn't look you in the eye, you make error-filled assumptions about the reasons and pass judgment about their honesty. In **polarization**, you judge that difference as wrong. "It's wrong to not look someone in the eyes when you're speaking to them," when in reality that is a cultural expectation of many white people and supremacy culture, that is not shared across the globe or even in this country.

**Minimization** is when we see the difference but discount its importance. We believe the differences don't matter – but when we discount those differences, people can feel discounted or unseen. A world of microaggressions exist in this space of minimization – “I don't see color” in one such minimization that can feel dismissive of someone else' ethnic and cultural heritage – especially when said by a white person to someone in the global majority.

**Acceptance** is when we see differences and accept them as true differences – understanding that taking a typing class can have one meaning in one family and quite the opposite meaning in another. Or that fun can be defined for one person as 'Mud ball!' And for another as 'Tea Party!' But acceptance doesn't mean we can do difference, just that we just see it.

**Adaptation** is when we can not only see and understand the difference but engage in different behavior based on the setting – I might play mud ball with this friend to bond better and have a tea party with another friend to relate well. I can adapt my behavior in order to better communicate with my friend, despite our differences.

“Do you want to be right, or do you want to be effective?” is the question I learned to ask in order to navigate difference and escape the polarization.

We used to say that most of us were in the minimization stage of development. That includes most people who take the Intercultural Development Inventory – the test that reveals your stage of development, and by extension, most Unitarian Universalists. This IDI was developed in 1998. There was this lovely bell curve. /slide/ but I wonder if this is no longer true, if, in reality, it seems that society has regressed to the polarized stage of development.

In January of 2022 David Brooks of the New York Times wrote an opinion piece entitled America Is Falling Apart at the Seams – he gives instances of reckless driving and altercations on airplanes, drug overdoses, disruption in classrooms, rise of hate crimes and increase of gun purchases. He goes on to say that “something darker and deeper seems to be happening as well – a long-term loss of solidarity, a long-term rise in estrangement and hostility. This is what it feels like to live in a society that is dissolving from the bottom up as much as from the top down.”

The violence yesterday at a Trump rally only underscores his statement that “this is what it feels like to live in a society that is dissolving from the bottom up as much as from the top down.”

Murray Bowen, the researcher who is most credited with Family Systems Theory, said that “regression occurs in response to sustained chronic anxiety, and not in response to acute anxiety.” That is, in a crisis we might regress, but then we move forward after the crisis has abated. With acute anxiety, we don't have a chance to recover and move forward, because the next crisis moment has presented itself. With climate change, politics, racism, and all the isms and oppressions, when is the crisis over? With this latest shooting - assassination attempt - there is both acute anxiety on top of the ongoing chronic anxiety. No wonder we are regressing. No wonder we are polarized.

But there's hope. I'm here to spread the good news. We are understanding the forces within and around us that shape our worldview. We can learn to develop an intercultural mindset. We can understand how our families shaped us and make different choices. We can choose to take the polarization detox challenge I spoke about last Sunday and was in Friday's bulletin, adding to the body of research that will help us understand these dynamics and find a way out. Or take the first comprehensive survey of the queer community in the state of Washington, if you identify as such. All this research contributes to our learning.

But, we can learn only if we can calm our nervous systems, reduce the chronic anxiety, return to our spiritual grounding and faithful practice. We must take a breath, reflect together, and wait for emerging truth over quick speculation. As UUA vice-president for programs and ministries, Ashley Horan, says we must anchor ourselves in communities and relationships that foster resilience, liberation, and strategy. We must cultivate nuance and seek out deep wisdom, political analysis and spiritual grounding because misinformation will be – no – *is* rampant.

We need community to remind us and keep us on track. We need community to learn that our assumptions aren't universal. We need community in which to sing and dance and move our bodies toward liberation.

To help us do that, we're next going to learn a Zulu chant written by Joseph Shabalala founder of Ladysmith Black Mambazo on a trip to New York City in 1988. He was missing his home in South Africa, and with Apartheid still in effect, he didn't know if he would ever be allowed to return. He said, "be still my heart, even here I am at home." Talk about calming the nervous system! Be still my heart. Even here I am at home. You wouldn't think that such a short song would have so much meaning behind it, but this is a different paradigm than our tradition of very wordy hymns. The power in chants like Thula Klizeo is in the depth of meaning, its connection to the traditions of the past and its defiance for a better tomorrow. Kristine will teach it to us: [Thula Klizeo](#)