

Sacred Beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by John Hennessy

My mother was a generous person -- generous with her time, talents and compassion. And this is how she taught me.

When I was sixteen years old, I finally got my driver's license. I was so excited when my mom asked me to drive my Uncle Ross to the train station about three miles from our house. I was proud to be trusted with the car. As we drove down our street, children were out playing all around. I was watching for the children when a small, brown dog ran out in front of the car. I stopped to wait for the kids to call the puppy over. I saw the little dog run over to the kids and I continued slowly down the street. Immediately, there was the awful sensation of the car going over a lump. And then a second lump. Where was the puppy? Apparently, the dog had jumped back off the curb right in front of the car. Immediately I stopped the car. Uncle Ross and I jumped out to look for the dog. There it was, lying in a pool of blood in the street.

Horrified, I put my hands to my face, and ran home, bursting through the front door crying out, "I just ran over the neighbor's puppy!" Uncle Ross followed me into the house to say, "It wasn't John's fault. He couldn't see the little dog." "What do I do now?" I cried to my mother. Mom calmly asked me if the neighbor who owned the dog was there. "Yes!" I blurted out "she saw the whole thing!"

"Well, we're going down there together and apologize to that poor woman." my mother replied, "She needs to be comforted!" Mom took my hand and we walked together to the neighbor's house. By this time, the remains of the puppy had been removed and they had thrown a bucket of water in the street to wash the blood away. The neighbor was standing stoically on her front porch. We walked up to her as I bowed my head and stammered, "I'm. . . I'm so sorry that I ran over your dog! I just didn't see it!" She slowly shook her head and replied, "That's OK. I was really worried something like this would happen. We just couldn't keep the pup from runnin' in the street." Then, my mother quietly stepped forward and hugged the woman tenderly. Both women wept. After a few minutes, the neighbor finally said, "I guess these things just happen." And with that, mom and I turned to walk home. At home, Uncle Ross said he'd just take another train. And later that afternoon mom brought over a tuna-noodle casserole and she and the neighbor became good friends.

[Link to reading by Adaku Utah](#)

Sacred Beings© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

“Cultivating trust is an organizing strategy.” I love that idea, and the image of the mycelium network as a metaphor for our relationship connections. (Adaku Utah) Pluralism is our theme this month, and I think there is a relationship between pluralism and trust. It is when we don’t trust others that we insist on sameness. If we don’t value another’s difference, we dismiss it or downplay it or negate it altogether. We prefer they become like us.

“It takes courage to bring our trust forward and invite another person to meet us there. This sometimes sure, often shaky, surrender is an opportunity to discover something deeper than the confines of our individual experience.” writes Adaku Utah or, as it’s said in our newly adopted statement of values, “we covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Now the language in our UU statement of values is pretty straightforward – we learn from each other as we search. What the Utah quote does is explore the more complicated and real experience of learning from one another – that it requires surrendering our particular experience to the experience of another, it requires a giving up the certainty of our experience to explore the possibility of a different understanding that might contradict our own or add to or subtract from our own.

We are diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We are sacred beings – meaning we have dignity and worth and value, and that value is not dependent on a particular culture or experience of theology, but rather intrinsic to our being human. We are sacred because we are. And the way we exist in the world is through a plurality of cultures, experiences and theologies. Some of us slither, others run, some fly or swing, even swim. Some of us leap. But we all get around. “God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another” it says in the Qur’an.

More than 50 people came yesterday to the workshop we had on the Enneagram – a system for understanding our own patterns, automatic reactions and blind spots, a way to become more flexible and skillful with the people in our lives. Because we do approach the world differently – with a leap, a swing, or a slither. Until we learn about the plurality of approaches, we can fall into the trap of assuming that others experience the world the same way we do. Dale Rhodes, the facilitator yesterday and our speaker last Sunday, referred to his quibble with Jesus, that we shouldn’t treat others as we would like to be treated “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” – what is known as the Golden Rule, but rather we should treat others as they would have us treat them – what I’ve learned as the Platinum Rule. We don’t all wish to be treated the same. What energizes me – time alone with a book – isn’t the same as what energizes my spouse who comes alive when making music with friends. In fact, I left that workshop yesterday to go home and write a sermon whereas he stayed to make music at the Coffee House. Until we learn that difference and to treat each other with the Platinum- not the Golden -Rule, the tension in relationships can be quite great.

A congregation is a network of relationships. Like the mycelium network, a congregation is a network of systems, a community. It was exciting to me that so many in this congregation attended the Enneagram workshop yesterday because of the potential for this understanding to help us with our network of relationships. Like so many families, organizations and institutions, we’ve been under tremendous pressure and undergone enormous change through the pandemic and aftermath. Some of that pressure has been financial – as families face financial pressures, so do the institutions funded by them. Money is a marker of energy. It indicates energy and direction. As an institution committed to including folks with limited means, it is all the more important – how we include everyone and pay the bills and the staff and have energy for the social justice projects we undertake. Two years ago we had a hard time making a budget because the money wasn’t there. We cut our dues to the UUA, and professional expenses for our staff. Last year was much better, but even so, we have questions about how to fund

the institution and our mission while helping and including families under similar financial pressures and building greater generosity among those who have means and money. These questions have led us to hire a consultant – we got an endowment grant to pay for it. And this consultant will be meeting with leaders over the weekend of November 10th, the Sunday after some big election that’s going on in this country....

I’d love you to put this date on your calendars so that you might hear the report of this consultant. It’s Sunday, November 10th. We’ll be having a meeting at noon or 12:15 or so in the afternoon to hear the report of a consultant we’ve hired to help us examine our community and systems. It’s called Next Steps. There will be a light lunch provided, but the meeting is the big draw. Like the mycelium network, a congregation is a network of systems, a community. It has a web of roots that connect us to each other, the wider community and the earth itself. This consultation is to help us examine the health of that network of relationships and make recommendations for improvement. It is focused on money, because, well, we need money to exist as an organization, but it is not just about money. It’s about the overall health and capacities of the congregation. This consultation will take place all weekend with key leaders, but the report of the consultant will be presented to all of you on that Sunday following the 11am service.

We, as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, revised the way we describe ourselves and our faith this summer, adopting new language in Article II of the bylaws. Instead of (or in addition to) 7 principles, we talk about 7 values – some of us use the JETPIG acronym to remember them. JETPIG is only 6 letters, but we remember that love is at the center. So, a central value is love, and then we have, Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence and Generosity. This month we’re exploring pluralism and the fact that “We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.”

As a faith movement, we have placed great value on our ability to learn and grow as humans. John’s story this morning was one of learning from his mother – and those early, primary learning experiences form us in the deepest of ways. Sometimes, like the generosity learned from his mother, we wish to keep those learnings, but other times, we need to unlearn lessons of our youth which aren’t as resourceful or helpful.

The purpose of the Enneagram, for example, is not to type you and say you are trapped by your preferred habits and worldview, but rather to help you learn your preferences so that you might notice what is habitual and where you might have a choice to try a different way or meet someone or understand their preferred way of navigating the world. “A catalyst to grow beyond ourselves.” in the words of Adaku Utah, “To find the places where love can exist even when we are unsure of the destination. To embrace a kind of faith brave enough to yield a wider focus often unseen with a singular lens.”

I can already imagine those in the room who are uncomfortable with the reading this morning because it attributes the human notion of “trust” to the ecosystem of a network of plant roots. But to that objection, I ask you to “embrace a kind of faith brave enough to yield a wider focus often unseen with a singular lens.” My speculation – and I’ll own, my own discomfort with not knowing whether the reading about mushrooms was metaphorical or meant to be literal – led me to look up the author, whom I did not know – and I wasn’t surprised to learn she is a 6th generation Igbo healer – besides being a grassroots strategist, social justice facilitator, somatic healer and ritual artist. She practices ancestral

intuitive healing, not something American mainstream culture tends to appreciate or understand. The Igbo people are from West Africa.

I have the smallest glimpse into a form of ancestral intuitive healing from my short time among the Garífuna people of Honduras. I served in the Peace Corps and lived among the Garífuna, or Black Caribs, a people who were brought from Africa on a slave ship. This ship wrecked on the island of St. Vincent where, no longer enslaved, they mixed with the Amerindian population on the island before being kicked off the island to the North Coast of Central America, including Honduras and Belize. I learned a little of their Dügü faith, which included a deep awareness of the ancestors and a belief that they remained active after death in the lives of their descendants, including causing physical illnesses. One consulted a Dügü priest when someone was ill. You might translate *Dügü priest* to *shaman* or *curandero*. And this ancestral faith of the Garífuna people lived alongside the Catholic faith of the conquerors and colonizers. One consulted the Dügü priest before the Catholic priest, to find out which aggrieved ancestor was the cause of the illness suffered by someone. Then the Catholic priest would be called in to hold mass in that ancestor's name to appease his spirit and, consequently, cure the sick person. I have read, that full meals were buried in the sand for the spirit for which mass was held, but I was never privy to that ritual if, indeed it happened in the village of Travesía while I lived there.

These two religions existed side by side in two cultures and languages. The Catholic priests did not live in the village, but had to come in from a neighboring town, and did not speak Garífuna, only Spanish – or Spanish and another language, but never Garífuna. Whereas the Dügü priest, like all Garínagu, was bilingual – spoke Garífuna and Spanish, the language of the conquerors and schooling. This is just to say that the Catholic priests pretty much had no idea that they were playing a part in a Dügü ritual when being asked to hold mass in an ancestors' name.

It is easier, sometimes, to see cultural difference in people who speak different languages with vastly different worldviews, but the truth is, it is often the near-difference that trips us up. We don't expect different worldviews from someone who looks like me, speaks the same language I speak, with a similar socio-economic background and educational experience, same religion. But that difference exists – I couldn't wait to get home after that workshop so I could be alone and write, just as I suspect that my husband couldn't wait to get going and help with the Coffee House last night.

“It takes courage to bring our trust forward and invite another person to meet us there.” There, in a world of pluralism and difference, there, where we don't all see the world in the same way. It takes courage to trust that another's experience is valid even when it is different from our own.

I want to return to the Enneagram for a second because I made a connection last week that I'd never made before. I mean, sort of like the discomfort with the word “trust” being applied to plants, the Enneagram has a rather unscientific origin, or at least vague and unclear origin, which is uncomfortable for some of us who like clarity and history and science. But I like it because it fits my experience of myself and the world. In short, it works. So, I discard my concern over its origin or science. However, something Dale Rhodes said last week clicked with the science and reinforced my understanding.

There are 9 types in the system, but only three centers: the heart center, the head center and the gut center. When Dale talked about those centers last week, I couldn't help but return to the reading from the week from before – and those of you keeping a bingo card with polyvagal theory on it – you're about to get a chip! – but the reading from the week before described how Stephen Porges has shown we have “three brains meant to function in concert, with the autonomic nervous system connecting them all.” He's referring to the cerebrum – the head center – the brain we think of as the brain, but also the heart and the gut, which we now know, thanks to the polyvagal theory, also inform us and provide

information to us about the world, also help us think. It makes so much sense to me that some of us would lead with one of these ways of thinking, while others lead with other ways of thinking. Though we need all three and so our network of relationships helps us in the areas we don't generally lead with...

"It takes courage to bring our trust forward and invite another person to meet us there." Which reminds me of a poem by Rumi, 13th century Islamic scholar, Sufi mystic and poet. He wrote:

[Out Beyond Ideas by Rumi](#)