

Embracing Difference with Love, Curiosity, and Respect

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

I've been trying to make sense of the polarization that plagues our culture. In theory, we embrace pluralism, recognizing that diverse viewpoints and experiences enrich our society. But in practice, it's really easy to indicate that we have already chosen our teams. Do you like Taylor Swift? Are you vaccinated? Do you eat bacon? Your views can affect your friendships and family relationships.

I just returned from the Jane Austen Society conference, which this year was in Cleveland. Hundreds of people learned more about Jane Austen, author of books like *Pride and Prejudice* from the early 1800s. There were academics, podcasters, and people who like to wear Regency costumes.

Cleveland had it going on. The conference hotel is near the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and the football stadium. I hadn't been to a pro football game since 1984, so I went to see the Bengals play the Cleveland Browns. I've never been to a postseason baseball game, and the Mariners haven't given me much hope, so I snagged a ticket to a playoff game between the Guardians and the Yankees.

And, big news: the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremonies were in Cleveland, and many musicians and presenters were staying at my hotel.

So the hotel had an odd mix of sports fans, famous musicians, and Jane Austen enthusiasts.

I spent that week observing group behavior, and the ways people identified as members of their groups.

Sports fans wore team colors, and, as a group, were more intense than the Jane Austen fans, although there was, of course, overlap. This is in no way a broad indictment of sports fans, or even everyone at the events I attended. The sports world has condemned the way Bengals *and* Browns fans celebrated when an unpopular quarterback ruptured his Achilles tendon during the game I was at. It was extreme behavior. The baseball game was exciting, and the local team won, but in the stands, things got ugly. There were signs saying "Cleveland against the world." People were throwing things at Yankees fans and chanting "go back where you came from," and worse.

At the hotel, it was easy to identify the musicians by the way they carried themselves and by the clothes they wore. I never saw royalty like Dr. Dre or Cher, but bands like Foreigner and Kool and the Gang were friendly, and the Jane Austen crowd was well mannered. This photo, with women in Regency outfits and the bass player from Foreigner, was taken at the musician's request. Musicians and Janeites mingled a bit, and I was impressed that everyone I saw was respectful and polite.

Maybe it was because Jane Austen wrote about manners, and preferred irony instead of outrage when things went wrong. Or maybe it was because conference guidelines are explicit. The rules stated: Make it easy for others to join in at meals and activities. Encourage newcomers and those who are less frequently heard to offer their views.

The experience was a reminder to me that we communicate our values by how we carry ourselves, and whether we are welcoming and respectful. That's as true here in this church as it is in politics, sports and rock & roll.

Embracing Difference© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir. I love that song by Bill Staines. I often use it to preach a Universalist Message of Hope – we all belong, we all have a place, we are all saved -whatever salvation looks like to you. But I requested the song for this morning because of the lyrics about some singing higher and some singing lower and some singing out loud on a telephone wire, and clapping your hands or paws or anything you got.... Because a choir needs voices with different ranges, and a congregation needs people with different spiritual sensibilities, and a country needs people with different viewpoints. Pluralism has been our theme this month of October. We've explored a plurality of perspectives with the Enneagram, how we learn from one another in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and how we are uniquely different from each other and want to celebrate, not squash those differences. I had help from Dale Rhodes, an expert on the Enneagram, and Elisha Hardekopf, Director for the WSU Vancouver Building a Community of Equity Program. What more is there to say, you might ask?

I'm glad you're curious. We're exploring the values adopted this summer as a way to describe our faith. JETPIG is the acronym with love at the center. Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, Generosity. Here is the section about Pluralism.

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.

This morning I am focusing on that last sentence – “embracing our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.” Like Deborah and likely others of you, I am heartbroken by the divisiveness in our country at this time and the political leaders who amplify and capitalize on our divisions, stoking fear rather than bringing us together and embracing our differences with Love, curiosity and respect.

Instead, my vision of America includes the lovely image Deborah painted for us of Janeites, sports fans, and musicians gathering in a hotel for distinct purposes which strikes me as the human version of the *All God's Critters* song– the birds and cows and owls and raccoons, and our recent stories for all ages, last week with a dog learning the Platinum Rule from a cat and the week before the frog trying to learn to leap from animals who slither and fly and swim.

But, as Elisha pointed out last Sunday, the desire to connect can be hampered not only by the size of our world – does it include only sports fans, or does it also include Janeites and musicians – is our world small or big – but by our positionality – the confluence of our identities – older, white, woman married to a man, able-bodied active minister short and wide – I'm sure I could come up with more identities, but this positionality affects how the world interacts with me, and therefore how I interact with the world. On top of all that, layer our learning from the Enneagram, that I am someone who leads from the head-brain rather than the heart-brain or the gut-brain, that's why my words are on the page in front of

me, because I don't quite trust myself to speak from the gut or the heart. But I have other gifts – like noticing things others might miss and an ability to tolerate being alone quite well – I am one for whom the isolation of a stay-at-home order was not a hardship, but a relief. Some of us become endlessly curious about ourselves because we feel like there is something wrong with us, that we don't fit in, that we aren't like others. Hopefully, we learn that everyone is unique and not many feel like they “fit in” – and we become as curious about others as we are about ourselves. That's probably a tendency described in the Enneagram – whether one is mostly curious inwardly or outwardly. You can probably tell I'm an inward-focuser – as Dale pointed out, so was the Buddha.

I chose the reading about curiosity for Deborah to read this morning. Only it confused me because the author said there were 6 steps to follow in order to stay curious throughout life, but then only listed 5. 1. Imagine you're a reporter on a story, 2. Read, read, read, and read some more, 3. Make a list of the things to want to learn and go do it, 4. In every conversation, think of questions to ask, not things to say, and 5. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. I'm curious if anyone noticed that? It's probably more obvious in written form than when hearing it read.... I honestly kept thinking I was missing something and would find the 6th step in there somewhere.

Instead, from Deborah's perspective as an editor, she speculated that it was an editorial error. Deborah figured and I'm quoting her note to me, “there's a spot where two words are repeated, which is a perhaps a clue that the editing process was rushed. In the first idea, maybe the writer initially referred to the 5 Ws. When I was in journalism school, a professor said the addition of the sixth letter (H for how), was an afterthought. My theory is the writer started with 5 Ws, then realized it should be 6 because of the H and went into that little digression about the H. Much later, reading back over the completed piece, the writer or an editor saw the mention of five ideas, and thought, “no, it's six!” and changed it. There's probably a technical term for editing in a mistake while thinking you're correcting a mistake.” End quote.

I love that. She easily came up with a theory that makes sense. I knew there was something wrong but didn't have a theory. All that is to say we each think and process differently – even when we share some positionality.

Staying curious is an antidote to fixed positions that prevent us from understanding one another. I'm going to say that again: Staying curious is an antidote to fixed positions that prevent us from understanding one another. Just because the article was flawed didn't mean it didn't have good ideas that might help us. But nuance isn't available when we've taken sides and our positions are fixed, when we've judged starkly right and wrong. And though I'm using a poorly edited article as my example, I suspect you know I'm really talking about something else...

Something that is happening a week from Tuesday, that is. I'm not suggesting you shouldn't have a strong opinion about this year's presidential election. I certainly do. But it's the staying curious about why others have a polar opposite strong opinion that concerns me. I don't know how many of you took me up on my challenge to join the Polarization Detox Challenge, but I continue to get great texts and emails from the *Starts With Us* organization. “Based on decades of research from Columbia University professor Peter T. Coleman, the Polarization Detox Challenge is designed to help shape new habits and norms for political tolerance and courageous compassion. Think of it as a personalized bootcamp for building a healthier national culture, repairing broken relationships, and solving problems across differences” – that's how it's described on their website.

Differences is what we're talking about this month with the theme of Pluralism: We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

They – this *Starts With Us* organization - are the reason I thought this film, *The Tennessee 11*, would be good to show immediately before the election. The showing that was canceled today because we couldn't get our hands on it. But it's a documentary that "follows a group of ideologically diverse citizens in the wake of the Covenant School shooting in Nashville as they try to find common ground on one of the country's most divisive issues: gun rights and safety." I'm reading from the description of the film on its website:

"The film depicts how eleven strangers, despite their different positions on guns, were able to work together to develop solutions to gun violence, in a state that has the 11th highest firearm death rate in the nation. The citizens' productivity and respect for one another is juxtaposed with the state legislature's inability to make progress on the same issue, including a tense special session that took place while the film was being shot and resulted in little agreement on guns."

This documentary was produced by Amelia D'Entrone for *Starts with Us*, but is apparently only available at film festivals right now. I was very disappointed we couldn't watch it before the election. In addition to creating this documentary, they've been ranking the "Top Ten Problem Solvers and Dividers in Congress – a weekly rundown of the top (and bottom) players in America's most popular full-contact sport: politics." This includes politicians of both parties, and they do this each week.

So, for example, Jon Ossoff, Democratic senator from Georgia was ranked 94.3% for policy discussion, constructive debate, and legislative efficacy, what they call a Builder. He rated 55.2% on personal attacks. Lori Chavez-DeRemer, Republican from Oregon ranked first as a Builder with a 90.9% score on policy discussion, constructive debate, legislative efficacy. She rated 50% on personal attacks.

Then, they also ranked politicians who divide – Dividers include Eric Swalwell Democrat representing California 14th district, received only 68.1% of a Builder's score and 94.7 percent on personal attacks. Likewise, Republican Mary Miller from Illinois, received a Builder's score of only 50% with a 94.7% personal attack score, the same as the Democrat from California.

It can be so easy to make the assumption that "we are the builders" and "they are the dividers" – when one places value on building policy discussions, constructive debates and legislative action. But – and this is the point of this research that Peter T. Coleman has done – it is so much more complicated than that. This is why he uses "Complexity Science," applying scientific principles and methods to understand and analyze complex systems in the social sciences. Our brains want to simplify so we can understand things, but reality is always more complicated than our understanding. This is why theology exists, you know, because we live in mystery and we long to make meaning of that mystery.

I just think it will help us going into this election to remember all that is mysterious to us, to remember the complexity, and struggle with the urge to simplify. We do our ourselves and our opponents a disservice when we generalize and simplify and polarize. The strategy I'm offering this morning is built into that value statement we adopted at this year's General Assembly - We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect. I'm focusing on curiosity because I think Love and respect are more self-evident.

Curiosity requires imagination and movement and, as Chad Bockius reminds us, discomfort. "Get comfortable being uncomfortable" he writes as a strategy for remaining curious throughout our lives.

1. Imagine you're a reporter on a story,
2. Read, read, read, and read some more,
3. Make a list of the things to want to learn and go do it,
4. In every conversation, think of questions to ask, not things to say, and
5. Get comfortable being uncomfortable.

5, not 6, Life Lessons on Curiosity. Because it can be uncomfortable when we encounter difference, but it can also be instructive – we learn more when we stick with the discomfort and stretch a bit. We're generally willing to be uncomfortable when we've identified something we really want to learn. We learn by reading and reading and by asking – the 6 W's, not 5 - Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How? We learn by listening-and-asking more than talking-and-sharing our ideas. These lessons on curiosity can help us whenever we encounter difference and embrace pluralism – they can keep us moving forward, and prevent us from turning back. I close with a prayer by DL Helfer.

[Let Love Lead by DL Helfer](#)