

## ¿Quines Somos?

### Reflections on Our Cultural and Racial Diversity

A Sermon by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale

May 4, 2003

When I would come back from vacation as a child, the church ladies would always declare, “You are so dark! Did you lay out in the sun all summer?” and I would reply, “No, I just get this way,” since it was the truth: my brother Wendell and I got very dark just walking around, while my lighter-skinned siblings turned red and sunburned. We said that my brother and I took after my father, while my other brothers and sister took after my mother. I wondered if the church ladies thought I laid around all summer with one of those metal sun reflectors around my face, like I’d seen in a movie. They also used to pinch my skinny little arm and say, “Doesn’t anyone ever feed you?!” To that, I had no reply, since of course someone fed me! Were they daft? (I didn’t use that word, though, since it wasn’t in my vocabulary yet.) I learned that people will say the strangest things.

When I was a little older, I compared my arm with my African-American friend’s arm one summer, and I was darker. That was an interesting thing to contemplate: I was “white” and she was “black,” but I was darker than she was. I learned that race wasn’t exactly about the color of your skin.

As I grew older, church people would always comment on how I took after my father in looks. I had learned to identify by then as “white,” although no doubt a “dark white,” and I used to wonder if the fact that my father had lived in Mexico for a while and spoke Spanish somehow influenced his coloring. His mother was blond and blue-eyed, like my mother, but Dad and his father were both dark haired, dark-eyed. I used to think my father was just as handsome as Elvis Presley, but since I thought Elvis was a dork, I probably never told my Dad that.

Somewhere along in the growing up years, I heard the story that my great-grandmother had been part Native American. As I remember it, she confessed this to my great-uncles on her death-bed, but that must have been a dramatic rendition on my or someone's part, because my father said, no, they knew all along. It was a family story. It was just that my great-grandmother didn't want to talk about it, and when my grandfather tried to get the details one time, she got mad at him and buried all his notes in a sewer they were digging at the time. I like that story better than the death-bed one.

As my father tells it, my great-great-great-grandfather, Anderson Jones, told people that his mother had been born in Italy. This was a strange thing to say, since there were no Italian people living in the wilds of Kentucky in 1814. My father thinks that since President Jackson had signed a bill declaring that Native Americans could not own land or gain citizenship, one wasn't going to admit to being Native American if they could get away with it. Later on, my father found that they had moved to the reservation in Missouri where the Delaware Indians lived, and Anderson Jones' mother's birth place was registered in the census as "unknown."

My great Aunt Doris told my father that great-grandmother Leona's mother was full Native American, and we surmise she was either Delaware or Cherokee. This makes me 1/16th. I wish I had known that when I went to college! Maybe I could have qualified for Federal scholarships! This also explains why my grandfather was called "Little Running Deer" at his college in Oklahoma, where, I guess, he was one of the fastest runners. His college was on or near the reservation there.

If only the Unitarian Universalist Association had known! All this time, they thought that we had no Native American ministers, and yet, my grandfather, Charles Manker, became a Unitarian minister the same time as my father! The UUA still doesn't know, and since the Federal government counts you as Native American if you're 1/16th, then I guess I could say I'm a Native American minister, too.

How strange! How weird! I mean, is there anything residually Native American about me besides the fact that I turn black in the sun and my daughter could pose as Pocahontas? Was more than just the family story passed down through the generations? If a people are made to hide their identity and lose touch with their culture, is their racial background still important?

I didn't even hear the "Little Running Deer" story until last year. My father says he's told us that before, but who knows, when there are five kids, you do miss out sometimes! Hearing that story, though, was like a clincher for me--I really **am** 1/16th Native American. So, what does that mean to me? Who am I really?

This just adds confusion, or maybe intrigue, to my identity as a fifth-generation Unitarian on my mother's side. Her German grandfather and great-grandfather founded the Evanston, Illinois, Unitarian church. Unlike the slow revelation of my Native American heritage, my German heritage was clearly revealed to me growing up in the compromise my parents made to open at least one present on Christmas Eve in the tradition of my mother's family. The rest had to wait for Christmas morning, when my father loved to make us line up down the hall while he laid a fire and turned on the tree lights. I guess, being a minister, he loved to create ambiance: the holy setting, loving attention to detail and beauty. Where did he get that from?

If I were to choose what culture most influenced me growing up, it wouldn't be the German, or my father's Hungarian mother, whose paprikas and noodles I still make though I haven't in a long time since I've been off red meat. The culture I most identify with is the Hispanic culture of the Southwest. Even though my family has lived in the Southwest for at least four generations, I never felt I could claim this culture because I don't have a drop of Hispanic blood in me. Nevertheless, I grew up speaking dinner-table Spanish ("Pasame la mantequilla, por favor") and was weaned on tacos and Spanish rice (I never really liked beans until I met my husband, Curtiss, and it is said

that I married him after he fed me his famous beans on the way to church one morning).

Speaking of Curtiss, he's a fourth generation or more Arizonan. His father's father homesteaded out by Elgin, and his mother's father was born and died here in Tucson. Curtiss, too, was weaned on Mexican food, but his mother's tongue burritos I'm sure outdid my father's tacos. Curtiss is also supposed to have Comanche blood in him, according to his dad, but the geneology has been lost. Maybe it wasn't the beans-- maybe it was my Cherokee that fell in love with his Comanche. But, like me, he identifies with this Hispanic culture we call home.

Lucky for us, we can now call ourselves Latinos, if we wish, and not get ostracized. The Latino Unitarian Universalist Networking Association (known as LUUNA) has affirmed the reality that "Latino" refers to a culture, not a race, and Latinos come in all races and from many countries. It probably helps that Curtiss and I both speak Spanish fluently. Although that's not necessary, as my friend Yolanda pointed out to me twenty years ago when we both taught bilingual education in South Tucson. Lots of Mexican-Americans, she said, were growing up speaking only English.

Asi, ¿quienes somos? Who are we? The identity of "we" is what "we" are exploring as "we" do the work of the Journey Toward Wholeness--the anti-racism, anti-oppression work in our movement. Telling our stories is one of the first steps in this work, and that is what I have chosen to do here today. I have only told a tiny version of my story, and shared just the barest portion of my ponderings about race and culture, but it's both a start and the continuation of conversations many of us have been having over the years. I didn't even talk about class and how that played out in my family, or wondered whether the possibility that my Native American ancestors were stripped of their land had anything to do with my father's family being poorer than my mother's. I have no idea what influenced what. I have no idea how I could claim to be part Native American when what I really am is Latino, and what the UUA

census-takers on diversity would make of me. If I grew up white, at least so far as checking that box under the race question, do I have anything to do with making our Unitarian association more diverse? What do you think? I really do wonder about these things.

I've left a little time toward the end of this service for you to share some of your reflections on our cultural and racial diversity. I hope we can begin to share our stories and learn from each other's experiences of identity, racism, oppression and privilege. Because, looking into each other's faces, we really don't know what is behind them, what counts in each other's lives and the ways we have felt affirmed or put down by others in society. We don't know the ways each other's paths have been hindered or eased by the color of our skin or the myriad other types of oppressions embedded in our culture. I also hope we will choose, as a congregation, to work on this Journey Toward Wholeness we talk about every year. Let's do something about it. The way we begin is with ourselves, sharing our stories, one by one.