

“The Better Angels of Our Nature”
Rev. Jessica Purple Rodela
Preachment: January 25, 2009 FUCW

The title of the sermon is a quote from Abraham Lincoln’s inaugural address. The sermon topic was chosen by Mark D--, who was the winning bidder for “Name that Sermon” from last fall’s Dream Auction. The phrase “practice of diversity” is from Mark.

Call to Worship:

Last Monday was Martin Luther King Junior Day in most of the United States. In honor of the week’s events, I read to you this, from King’s Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 1966:

“I would like to use as a subject the church remaining awake during a great revolution. I'm sure that each of you has read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled *Rip Van Winkle*. One thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed, he was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a revolution was taking place in the world, that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep. One of the great misfortunes of history is that all too many individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And there can be no gainsaying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today. . . . Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.”

Readings on “Creative Maladjustment”

When Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the UU General Assembly in 1966, he praised Unitarian Universalists for their work in civil rights, commitment to diversity, and their considerable leveraging of privilege. And he also admonished us – that it will be easy for a comfortable people to become so seduced by the promise of progress that we forget that there is always more work to do. After all, progress is a process – not a goal unto itself. He said this:

“ . . . there are some things in . . . our world to which I'm proud to be maladjusted. And I call upon you to be maladjusted and all people of good will to be maladjusted to these things until the good society is realized. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry .I never

intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few, and leave millions of people perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of prosperity.” . . .

“Yes, I must confess that I believe firmly that our world is in dire need of a new organization – the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment. Men and women as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, cried out in words that echo across the centuries—“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who had the vision to see that [a] nation could not survive half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, cried in words lifted to cosmic proportions—“We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal”. . . . As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could say to the men and women of his day “he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.” Through such maladjustment we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

Sermon: "The Better Angels of Our Nature" Rev. J. P. Rodela

My interview was exactly one question long. I was seated across from the principal of an inner-city parochial school in Washington D.C. The student population were scholarship students culled from poverty-stricken neighborhoods. All but one of the 800 students were African-American. The vast majority of staff and faculty were also African-American, by design, unapologetically, to provide “authentic role models of color.” I, on the other hand, was the wrong color.

E--, the head of the English department, was a controversial reformer at the school. She was lobbying to hire me. Before we entered the principal's office, E-- turned to me with a warning: “There's *no way* of knowing what she'll say to you. Good luck.”

After preliminary introductions, Principal D-- narrowed her eyes. The long fingernails she had drummed on the tabletop since my entrance stopped abruptly as she leaned across the table, frowned at me, and snarled, “*What makes you think you can teach my precious black children, Whitey?*”

That was it. My only interview question. It was racist; the kind of interview question that lawsuits are made of. . . .My color – or rather my perceived color -- was the only relevant fact of my life and potential success in this job, as far as Ms. D-- was concerned.

Ms. D--'s assumption about who I am, based on how I look, was completely correct And completely wrong . In the context of that school, I was “White”.. Much like in my current context, that for all my other-leanings among United States citizens where I am a minority, since I've moved here to Canada . . I'm the quintessential American. When Principal D-- asked me that single

interview question, she was demonstrating the kind of confrontation my students would pose to me every day for the next two years. She wanted to know how I would cope – IF I would cope – with a contentious environment where my race *would* be an issue and a challenge every day; where the ‘content of my character’ would be seen always through the lens of my perceived privilege. Whatever I think of her methods, Ms. D-- was testing me.

And I knew exactly what she was doing. So I answered her question.

I told her about growing up a minority in Panama. I told her about returning to the United States, the foreign country of which I am a citizen. I explained the pain of being not quite white, not quite Hispanic, straddling two cultural worlds and a true member of neither. I confessed that the fortunes of my life have ebbed and flowed – from wealth to homelessness; told of the suspicion I face from both men and women because I can fall in love with either one. I related the fear of being a religious minority in a stridently fundamentalist Christian community. And I acknowledged, that *none of this matters* when I walk into a room. Because for all my wealth of experience, what people see when I walk into a room is a well-groomed white woman – I am indelibly stamped with the benefit of class, and privilege of race and assumption of orientation – and in that first impression, the perception *is* the reality.

When I stopped talking, Ms. D-- leaned back into her chair. A slow smile took over her fierce complexion and, looking at E--, my department chair advocate, the principal gestured at me and said,

“Ooh, she’s goo-od.”

But it wasn’t my persuasiveness, or compassion, or sincerity that won me her confidence. It was that I answered, unflinchingly. I understood that relating to my students required that I enter into their world, and not expecting them to come into mine. I was prepared to learn as well as to teach. I was prepared to practice creative maladjustment; I was ready to risk the practice of diversity.

My encounter with Ms. D-- has been on my mind a lot lately. As so often happens, once I set my sights on a particular sermon topic, the Universe deems me with many opportunities to reflect on it. The first came a couple of weeks ago, when I went to see the new Clint Eastwood movie, *Gran Torino*. The film explores the complex relationship of race-related gang violence. It is a two hour illustration of the ways violence, answered by violence, begets more violence, and more, and more, in an endless cycle of fear, hopelessness and anger . . . but the disturbing images in the film were not graphic violence (at least not graphic by today’s movie standards). Instead, the movie illustrated most of its violence by showing its effects – the fear, the intense emotion, the heightened adrenaline, the revenge, as well as its devastating physical and emotional tolls. It was a hard film for me to watch because I knew *all those* kids. Over the span of a decade, I taught Latino gang members

in south Texas, and warring Asian gangs in north Texas, and finally faced that daily warfare of inner-city schools in Washington, D.C. As the film spooled its story, it unleashed a flood of memories so overwhelming that I was utterly unable to carry on polite conversation afterwards, and the story haunted my dreams with impossible persistence and with that nagging fear, always –*Why? And what happened to them? Did I make a positive difference?*

In D.C., the violence was overt, random and rampant – the students were mired in the maze of trying to get home without dying, and literally dying to get to school. Most of them made it most of the time. But some of them didn't, and the death toll was always rising. Against this backdrop, the standard Grade 10 curriculum took on new relevance : Julius Caesar interpreted as gang warfare, Othello's guilt weighed against the acquittal of football player O.J. Simpson; and – there , blocks away from the Washington Mall, we studied Martin Luther King Junior's speech "I Have a Dream" which many of their parents and grandparents had witnessed first-hand.

But my students were not interested in King's dream. "The Dream," in the face of despair-induced violence had not included them. And I did not understand that attitude until this week, when I realized *there is a loophole in that dream* involving our myths of diversity.

Our Unitarian "dream" is that our celebration of diversity will someday be reflected in a multicultural membership. *That it does not* is a discrepancy of our faith often remarked upon by newcomers to the faith.

Joseph Santos-Lyons writes: "The odds of meeting a Person of Color in a Unitarian Universalist congregation are 25 to 1. There are no congregations with a majority of People of Color. In a liberal religious faith with long standing commitments to racial justice, a community of People of Color has never materialized." The odds are even more sparse among ministers. Today, there are about fifty ministers registered as non-Anglo -- not surprising, given our membership; but the more startling fact is that only a *dozen* of these are actually serving Unitarian Universalist congregations, and over a career, only 20% of Ministers of Color, as we are called, *ever* serve as the Senior or only minister of a congregation¹.

So . . . congratulations. First Unitarian Congregation of Waterloo has already beat all odds. Out of over one thousand congregations in North America, you are one of just a dozen who have called a "minister of color."

¹ "The UUA has recognized the intense challenge of qualified Ministers of Color seeking to be called to UU congregations. In effect, most ministers of color have served primarily in extension, new congregation, associate or assistant level positions. Senior Minister positions, including only ministers, have been held by only 20% of the fellowshiped Ministers of Color in the last 25 years" *25 to 1: People of Color Experiences in Unitarian Universalism 1980-2005* : Joseph Santos-Lyons

And, no, I'm not making some cute joke about my name. And, yes, it's obviously a relative term. Ms. D-- would have been really surprised to hear me called a "person of color" – the term of choice by the UUA, and not a term I am happy with.

I am one of a very small minority amongst minorities, as a member of the Hispanic Ministers Caucus, which some years ago broke ranks with the larger encompassing minority caucus, over the very use of the term "Person of Color"; I was in league with the Seminarians of Color over the last three years; I am the founder of a racial justice program called *The Kaleidoscope Initiative* that transformed the conversation about race and Unitarianism at my seminary, and just this week I received a reminder from the Unitarian Universalist Association's Diversity of Ministry Team offering me free transportation to their third annual conference in March.

Yes, despite my majority status in the inner-city, according to the Unitarian Universalist Association, I am a minority. And, as someone uniquely poised across the threshold of our alleged open door policy, I've had an interesting vantage point.

I look back, outwards, aided by the lens of that disturbing movie, and recall how my inner-city students, living in the shadow of the monument where King declared "I have a dream today", were not interested and did not feel included in King's Dream, just one generation removed. This week, I think I understand that the practice of diversity is prevented by a well-meaning but ineffective model of inclusion I call "Open Door Syndrome".

"Open Door Syndrome" is the single biggest myth preventing Unitarian Universalist congregations from the genuine practice of diversity. It goes like this: "I opened the door to MY house – why aren't YOU walking through it?"

But imagine, being poised at the doorway, peering inside, and seeing no one you recognize; no face or family that looks like yours. An open door, however sincerely propped and unlocked, is not unto itself a welcoming beacon, but just a beginning.

Last week, in contemplating the movie, *Gran Torino*, I realized that Clint Eastwood's character only makes a difference when he finally consents to become part of the wider community, rather than insisting that others adapt to him. And ironically he uses his privilege as leverage to change the fate of that community. His character is a manifestation of King's 'creative maladjustment'. And that is the cure for "Open Door Syndrome" -- that we do something other than stand at the threshold, waving people in – the genuine practice of diversity requires that we step outside.

Unitarians have done this before, to good effect. Currently, half of the candidates preparing for Unitarian ministry are women; and while there are no statistics kept, our congregations regularly attract ministers and members from the gay community. Many of our congregations, this one included, have completed a program of education, outreach, and commitment to intentionally

support members, friends, and families from the lesbian-gay-bi-trans-queer community to achieve the official designation as a “Welcoming Congregation.” But the label and the program do not guarantee that this space feels safe to anyone who does not recognize themselves in the faces and attitudes of the assembled. One symptom of “Open Door Syndrome” is the common dismissal to the “Welcoming Congregation” program and other diversity initiatives: “but we already *are* a welcoming congregation.”

Reality check: if you look around the room, and everyone looks just like you, dresses like you, and is partnered like you – well, it’s no surprise that you feel welcome. *Like attracts like*. . . we are naturally more comfortable with people who look like us.

So, the first step in practicing diversity is to acknowledge your place in the crowd – if you are among the majority, and therefore carry a certain privilege of assumed belongingness – then ask yourself if you would feel quite so welcomed if you or your family looked or lived differently from most of the others in the room. *Be aware* of who is, and isn’t – in this space.

Second, the practice of diversity requires that we stop making assumptions about the people around us. In doing so, we alienate others. As a “boundary dweller,” I “pass” as a lot of things that I *kind of am*, and *sometimes am*, but *maybe I’m not*. . . . “Open Door Syndrome” works under the myth that becoming “one of us” is somehow the finest compliment. To be truly welcoming, we must be aware of the ways in which we make assumptions about class, education, vocation, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural background, and instead, we are called to use intentionally inclusive language with one another, and embrace, not negate, our differences.

Third, the single most effective way to practice diversity, is to *become* diversity itself. This was my lesson from teaching in Washington D.C. Let me be clear: this congregation has beat the odds of most Unitarian churches, and the membership here spans a healthy spectrum of many demographics in education, income, and age Now, wouldn’t it be great if I could tell you that I have a fabulous plan that will ensure our cultural diversity 5 to 10 years from now? Instead, I assure you that it probably *won’t* happen. Judging by the statistics of most Protestant congregations (*Unitarians are not unique in this way*), what we see today is very likely what we will continue to get. . . . especially if we continue to simply prop open the doors and expect people to just walk on in.

“Open Door Syndrome” hooks our congregations into an unhealthy obsession of making “diversity” a kind of measured goal, and however well-intended, makes things worse. In a popular Adult Religious Education curriculum called *Weaving the Fabric of Diversity*, there’s a short farcical play to illustrate the kind of weird desperation our congregations can succumb to. In it, a “membership search committee” visits the *Diversity Store* shopping for new members to “prove” the success of their multicultural initiatives. Now, I don’t remember how it goes exactly, but the plot more or less had them contemplating choices like the lesbian couple, an Asian family, a war veteran, and a

factory worker. In the end the committee enthusiastically selects an African American bisexual male in a wheelchair with a lesbian daughter from Nicaragua to be “one of them”.² Gee, isn’t he lucky?

Instead of shopping at the “Diversity Store,” we have to leave our comfort zones and experience it for ourselves. The practice of diversity does not happen from “this side of the door”; diversity happens “out there”. I cannot explain, demonstrate, or illustrate what it is to be the ONLY one of your kind unless you yourself, as an individual, has experienced it. Tourism doesn’t count. You must have lived or worked as a minority, in order to really have practiced diversity. We become ‘welcoming’ by actually creating relationships with others, not by theorizing how perfectly nice we are.

Within the congregational setting, there are several ways to *become diversity*; all of which require partnerships across the threshold of our open door. Some churches have organized “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” Parties, where small mixed groups of race, religion, orientation, and culture simply share a meal together. It’s awkward, so it’s effective; and it’s really revealing and disturbing to discover how uncomfortable being unmoored from the majority can be, even over a few hours around a dinner table. Our music committee has suggested choir exchanges or interfaith choir events as a way to enrich our relationships in the community. We could consider ways to creatively share our space, make this building and our resources available to community groups. We can sponsor community events, opening the doors for purposes that suit our values but expand our practice. And, the most effective way as a congregation to practice diversity in this model is to ultimately partner with another church, one of a different demographic, in a joined social justice effort. When we work side-by-side and find what binds us together, we build relationships. This is how we become established in the community; not as a faith that debates diversity, not as a faith that fishes for otherness as some kind of trophy of inclusion, but rather as a congregation committed to relationship and vision with programming for the human community. That’s the big dream I have today. Rather than insist that “THEY join the church,” why not have “The church join them.”³ Nothing else will make a difference.

On Tuesday I watched the US presidential inauguration. The camera swept over the vast crowds of the mall as an African American man spoke. The scene was reminiscent of that one, decades before, when Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech. . . . the culmination of that dream – Barack Hussein Obama – has been elected to the US Presidency. Aretha Franklin started singing, and I didn’t stop crying for hours. Because --- in the face of that anonymous crowd I knew that my students, the ones who survived the violence of their lives, would be standing there with their children, watching *hope incarnate* signal a new day with a new face that

² I could not find the curriculum to cite the actual play, so this is a “riff” on the idea, and not necessarily representative of its actual content. The curriculum was published by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

³ *Kicking Habits* by Thomas Bandy

finally mirrors the diversity of this hemisphere. A face that refused to be defined by cultural norms of what he could or could not become – a person committed to creative maladjustment, who steps beyond the threshold as a personal and political practice, not insisting that others come inside to be included, but rather extends the invitation for engagement “out there.” As such, the entire world is poised at a new threshold, standing at the ready for a new way to build a world community.

Together we can shape a world that defines *everyone as someone* and *no one as “other.”*

Open the door, beckon to everyone, – but to practice diversity, we must now step outside.

So, open wide the doors, let the light reside;

Carry it forward, and let it preside. . . .

Let the people say Amen.