

**Good NUUs: Growing Our Diversity**, by Rev. M. Lara Hoke                      October 11, 2009  
*a sermon preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover  
for the UUA-wide “Association Sunday”*

If you could just close your eyes and snap your fingers and have this congregation be the size you wanted, filled with the people and faces you’d love to see here.... What would it look like? How many people would be in here? 50? 75? 100? More? In your ideal imaginings, do you see what you perceive to be a variety of racial or cultural backgrounds? Do you see what you perceive to be a variety of socioeconomic groups represented? Do you see what you perceive to be a variety of sexual orientations represented? A variety of gender expressions? What else do you see in your mind’s eye?

If I may, I’d like to ask you to “come back to the now.” How many actually *are* here today? Who *is* here today? Who is *not* here today? Why *aren’t* they here?

Today, we are here for Association Sunday. This is the third Association Sunday of the Unitarian Universalist Association – each of them designed to “Grow our Faith” in some way. This year, the emphasis is “Growing Our Diversity”. You can look at the insert in your Order of Service to get the details, and I’ll mention a few details before the offering is taken. But why should Unitarian Universalists care about growing our racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity? Why should we here at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover care?

The first thing you might think of is that it’s “the right thing to do” (as Tracey Robinson-Harris wrote in our reading this morning). And it might well be the right thing to do, to be more multicultural – to be more multicultural racially, ethnically, socio-economically, and in other ways. I think we could easily argue that it is in alignment with our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes to become more diverse.

The next reason you might think for why all Unitarian Universalists, everywhere, should care about growing diversity in our denomination is survival. As you might be aware, the United States of America is going through the “most radical demographic shift in its history”<sup>1</sup>. In fact, this was the topic of a wonderful lecture I was lucky enough to attend at the UU Ministry Days, just before General Assembly, in Salt Lake City this past June. The Rev. Paul Razor gave the lecture. Razor is a professor of theology and religion as well as a UU minister. I want to share some of what he said with you.

Paul Razor pointed out in his lecture, and as you might know, the USA is in the midst of a “radical demographic shift”, the most radical shift we’ve ever had. You might be familiar with the Census Bureau’s projection that whites (or Euro-Americans) will no longer be a majority of our nation’s population by the year 2042<sup>2</sup>. That’s not so long from now, just about 33 years away.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Razor, “Ironic Provincialism”, Berry Street Lecture delivered in June 2009 at the UU Ministry Days in Salt Lake City, Utah. The entire lecture may be read at <http://www.uuma.org/BerryStreet/Essays/BSE2009.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Razor talked about this in his lecture. Source: U.S. Census Bureau release, August 14, 2008, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>; detailed tables at [http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/tablesandcharts/table\\_4.xls](http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/tablesandcharts/table_4.xls).

This demographic shift is too huge to be ignored. For starters, as Razor put it, “If we fail to respond to this new multicultural reality ... we [UUs] will simply become irrelevant. We could devolve into a quaint relic of a once-vital tradition, holding fast to our good liberal ideas (while continuing to bicker about them), protecting an increasingly insular identity.... This would be a tragedy, because we have much to offer, much to say that our world needs to hear.”<sup>3</sup> I agree with Razor. Unitarian Universalism has its own variety of good news, and it would be tragic if no one heard it anymore.

Before we become a truly anti-racist congregation, before we become multicultural and open and welcoming and affirming to all kinds of people everywhere, we will need to start at square one. And what is square one? It is simply this: Recognizing, and naming, *our* culture. Because in case you hadn’t thought about it, European roots are as “ethnic-y” as any other. English is, for most people on earth, a “foreign” language. Our educational and class trends are just as distinctive as anyone else’s. We are a culture! And the reality of having a dominant culture is that anyone who crosses our threshold, no matter what their own racial, cultural, or socioeconomic identity might be, will largely have to adopt our cultural ways to fit in with us – every bit as much as they’ll have to know English to understand most of what happens here.

Paul Razor’s lecture had a respondent – that is, someone was selected to give some remarks inspired by his talk. The respondent was the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, minister of the Fourth Universalist Society in New York. This was how she put what I’m trying to say, in much more elegant words. She said:

“We forget ... that it is not just those other people who have a culture. Unitarian Universalist congregations have a culture. Consider who many of us are, and who we are pretty proud about being, no matter what our race or ethnicity. Many of us are the people who brag about not owning televisions because there is nothing worth watching, unless it is PBS. Many of us are the people who refuse to listen to popular music because it is misogynistic and violent, and more than a few of us regard rap music as nothing more than noise and confusion. Many of us change the channel [when rap comes on], and listen to NPR and love Garrison Keillor and Prairie Home Companion, and laugh when Keillor makes fun of us. Many of us are unapologetic nature lovers... Many of us eat locally, and we shop at farmer’s markets, and we would never be caught in Wal-Mart, unless it was a dire emergency. Many of us do look ahead in our hymnal to see whether we agree with the words, and forget that the person sitting next to us may need exactly the words we are refusing to sing.”<sup>4</sup> Here end McNatt’s words.

Now, I have to own that some of what she said applies to me. Not all of it, but certainly some of it. The point here today isn’t that you have to change everything about who you are and what you like. The point is that you, and I, and all of us, have to become aware of who we are. We have to be aware when our culture is showing. We have to be aware, because whenever someone new visits us, of any racial, cultural, or socioeconomic group, believe me... *they* notice our culture. They can’t miss it. We need to know what we’re showing them.

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<sup>3</sup> Razor, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Bray McNatt, response to Paul Razor’s Berry Street Lecture at UU Ministry Days, June 2009. The entire response may be read at <http://www.uuma.org/BerryStreet/Essays/BSEResponse2009.htm>.

The reality is, our culture and cultural prejudices and cultural norms run deep, deeper than we care to name. Talking about this is hard. It can feel unsafe. Paul Razor noted in his lecture that “Multiculturalism threatens [our] sense of safety.” He said, “I have come to think that for many [of us], multiculturalism represents a form of danger. I do not think the danger, or the perception of danger, lies in the shifting demographics.... Instead, the sense of danger points to a deeper fear.” Razor believes that we Unitarian Universalists have ‘a fear of otherness that we have barely begun to recognize.’”<sup>5</sup>

Razor’s lecture talked about some of the primary norms of Unitarian Universalism; particularly the UU norms of emphasizing “human reason, [and] the autonomous authority of the individual...” There’s nothing wrong with emphasizing reason and individual authority per se; we can even be proud of this legacy. “Yet”, as Razor points out, “this legacy encourages us to keep our religious commitments largely in our heads, where we can hold them at a comfortable arm’s length. This gives us a sense of control; it allows us to feel spiritually safe.... At a deeper level, I think it is a fear of losing control.... I think,” said Razor, “the real fear is the loss of intellectual control. Our move toward becoming a... multicultural faith challenges our safe and tidy way of being religious. In this sense, multiculturalism might represent for some a threat ... to our very identity.”<sup>6</sup>

I, along with Razor and McNatt, believe that our religious identity will be greatly deepened and enhanced as we become more multicultural. I don’t think our emphasis on human reason and individual autonomy will go away – that’s a big part of our own “good news” – but incorporating new emphases might make Unitarian Universalism something warmer and richer and deeper than it has ever been. As Razor puts it, “*We cannot reason our way into multiculturalism. The reality of lived ... multicultural communities cannot be grasped through analysis... We will have to embrace it bodily, not just intellectually.*”<sup>7</sup>

And like any significant transformation, it can’t and won’t happen overnight. I don’t expect it to. But I do ask that we start recognizing when our culture is showing, and start thinking about the implications of that. Yes, by being less smugly satisfied with our cultural norms we might eventually “repel fewer visitors” (as the Rev. Peter Morales, the new President of the UUA, puts it). And yes, as the demographics of this country change, we might become more relevant as we become more multicultural; perhaps “We can be the religion for our time,” as Peter Morales’ UUA presidential campaign slogan put it.

But today, we’re not talking *just* about having a diversity of racial and cultural groups represented in our chairs, however wonderful that might be. Ultimately, we’re talking about growth in diversity, in spirit, and in numbers.

As many of my colleagues have concluded, there really is only one spiritually grounded reason for wanting to grow: And that is, we want to grow in numbers and diversity because we think Unitarian Universalism is wonderful and we want to spread the good news! The only spiritually

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<sup>5</sup> Razor, *ibid.* The quotation within the quotation is from Razor’s book, *Faith Without Certainty*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Razor, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

grounded reason for growing this congregation and our denomination is because we believe we have found and created something wonderful here, and we want our sisters and brothers, from all cultures and all walks of life, to be a part of it! We want to share! And we're better, and more whole, together.

I know this makes UUs uncomfortable. We're famously non-evangelical. Speaking of Garrison Keillor and *Prairie Home Companion*, I think part of the reason some of us love to listen to him making fun of Unitarian Universalism is – wow! Has he ever got us pegged! He sees our culture showing, and he puts a mirror on us... and for those of us listening to NPR on the radio rather than modern music, we hear it, see ourselves, and have to laugh. So allow me to indulge us. I shouldn't do this... but... Let me share a piece from his latest show, from just last Saturday, October 3<sup>8</sup>. In this bit on *Prairie Home Companion*, Guy Noir (private detective) was asked to do some secret football scouting on behalf of Gethsemane Seminary, a Bible-based, Baptist school. Guy Noir is asked to scout the UUUU football team – that's the Unitarian Universalist United University, whose team name is the "Emersonians". The reason for the spying is that the volume of betting on the game is way "off the charts" for reasons that are mysterious, given that the Emersonians of UUUU haven't won a game in 87 years. Guy Noir notes, "Unitarians aren't exactly a football powerhouse, are they."

To which the man from Gethsemane Seminary responds, the Unitarians "don't care about football at all. They don't even bother to work up plays. They just stand around arguing in the huddle and then they go and run off in all directions." After spending time in the huddle with the UUUU, Guy Noir is not impressed. "I drove away sure of one thing" Guy Noir says, "there was no powerful will to win among the Unitarians. Their team was just out to have an interesting football experience and then a post-game discussion."

Meanwhile, the cheers of the Unitarians on the sidelines sound like this, "Give me a U – if you want to! Give me another U – if you're comfortable with that! Give me another U – unless you have to get going! Give me another U – as long as it's approved by committee!"

In the end, the mystery of the high volume of betting on the UUUU game is this: The Unitarians have "bet six million dollars on the game. Their whole endowment. – And they bet against themselves." The UUUU will likely be filing Chapter 11. The whole thing ends with another song/cheer: "Unitarians, you're doing okay – at least you're not dark and depressing. The Baptists think they know the way, the Catholics are busy confessing. Baptists, they stand far apart, they look down on dancing and boozing. Unitarians love music and art and our sermons are much more amusing. Unitarians, our churches are small and sometimes attendance is tiny. But still we look up at the sky and always the sun is still shining." There ends the *Prairie Home Companion* bit.

And yes, it's fun to laugh at ourselves. It just is. But after we're done laughing, maybe, truly, we should be soul-searching... maybe we should be crying. Because the skit might be funny, but the situation isn't. What does the world see when they look at Unitarian Universalists, assuming

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<sup>8</sup> Garrison Keillor, *A Prairie Home Companion*, October 3, 2009. See <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2009/10/03/scripts/noir.shtml> -- you can read and listen to the complete episode there.

they know what UUs are? They see a group with “no powerful will”. They see a group that wants to “have an interesting... experience and then a post-[experience] discussion”. They see a group that has a lot of privilege and old Euro-American money (such as big endowments) – and then bets against itself! It’s funny, but it’s not funny. It’s really not funny at all. I don’t mind at all when we have some humor here and laugh – laughing is a bodily experience, after all. It’s a step in the right direction. But I can’t help thinking we will grow in numbers and diversity if we learn some new tricks – some new bodily experiences – along with our occasional laughter and love of reason. Can we experience the holy together? Can we have spiritual experiences together? Lived, bodily experiences? Can we bet on ourselves? Can we muster a powerful will to win, to grow... even if it means we might have to tell someone about how wonderful Unitarian Universalism is, or (still scarier) invite someone to come and worship with us?

In closing, I want us to be kind and gentle with each other as we move forward in this challenge. Change is threatening, and these are sensitive topics. As Rosemary Bray McNatt said in her response, “for people who are blessed with the gift of free religious community, we are also cursed with a nasty little Calvinist streak that we would do well to examine. We would rather be angry and judgmental with one another and ourselves than be tender and merciful, in simple acknowledgement of how hard it continues to be to do what we must do in our congregations – we must admit that we have a specific, sometimes alienating culture, and we must change it. And we must grieve the loss of the familiar and gain some measure of courage to embrace the new.” We are called to do “work of the spirit”, as she put it. She goes on, “We will have to learn to love each other more, and in better ways than we do right now. We will have to learn to forgive each other more, and in better ways, than we are used to doing. We will need the Universalist gifts of ‘hope and courage,’ too.”<sup>9</sup>

Unitarian Universalism can change because part of our gift is the ability to change, and to change relatively quickly. As one of my colleagues said to me, Unitarian Universalism is “being open to truth and meaning wherever it may be found”. That’s a real blessing, perhaps the very heart of our good news. Let us be open to the truth and meaning of our culture, and how we might grow spiritually. May we love each other through the challenge and the change. May we spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism in our communities and beyond. May we find wholeness, together. Blessed be, and amen.

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<sup>9</sup> McNatt, *ibid.*