

**The goal of world community
with peace, liberty, and justice for all**

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November 1, 2015*

By profession, I direct a race series that puts on running events at amusement parks around the country. At about this time last year, we were in Branson, Missouri, doing a race at a park called Silver Dollar City, an 1880s themed park owned by Herschend Family Entertainment.

The Herschends are a devout Christian family, and their faith absolutely drives the way they run their business and their parks. They host numerous Christian groups and events throughout their season; they only play Christian, Gospel, and bluegrass music during the hours they're open; Herschend parks are the only theme parks I've heard of that don't capitalize on the lucrative Halloween season; and their Christmas celebration is unapologetically about the birth of Jesus rather than the annual return of Santa.

As part of our weekend's events there, we hosted a dinner at the park, with a guest speaker who gave a talk about running injuries and how to avoid them. This talk involved a fairly lengthy explanation of how evolution has impacted our body mechanics and our running. I saw several of the park staff visibly react to the subject matter.

It was a very awkward five minutes. Over the time I'd been working with the Branson community, I'd become friends with people at the park, and I'd become friends with the guest speaker. And their two divergent belief systems had come into conflict around the subject of evolution.

This kind of discord occurs in the world all the time--the kind where perspectives are so different that they're not going to be resolved. Examples of it pervade our daily personal interactions, and underpin the major conflicts in politics and religion. For example:

- Donald Trump, at the start of his presidential campaign, called Mexican immigrants criminals and rapists. Many Americans want to build a wall at the US-Mexico border to keep Mexican and Central American citizens out of the country.
- There are conservative religious followers of a number of different faiths who believe that women should be subservient to men.
- Some of our neighbors think that police officers--not young African-American men--have been unfairly and systematically profiled over the past year.
- Some people don't trust Muslims. I once saw a man wearing a pin that said, "Everything I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11."
- Every time there is a shooting at a school, the number of people purchasing guns skyrockets.
- There are business owners who do not want to serve customers from the LGBT community.

- When 9 members of Emanuel AME Church were killed at a prayer meeting in June, Confederate flag sales in some areas of the country increased several hundred times over normal levels.
- Many wealthy Americans oppose taxes and policies that redistribute wealth in a meaningful way to impoverished fellow citizens, and many Americans of all income levels oppose any policy or spending that provides charity outside of our borders.
- There are Palestinians who hate Jews just because they're Jews, and Jews who hate Palestinians just because they're Palestinians. The same is true for any number of other ethnic groups: Serbs and the Croats, Indians and Pakistanis, and Hutus and Tutsis.

I hope I haven't overwhelmed you, or sucked all the hope and optimism out of the room. I bring up these examples for a reason. Our Unitarian Universalist Sixth Principle calls us to work toward world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all. And the thing that the people I just mentioned have in common is that they're all, every last one, part of the world community that we're called to be at peace with.

Achieving peace is fraught with all the ideological and communication challenges inherent in every person-to-person interaction among a diverse group of people. It's the kind of problem for which intellectual dialog is of little use. There's no debating it to get everyone to agreement. Practically speaking, it's an intractable disagreement. But fortunately, intractable isn't the same thing as hopeless.

Making a Case for a Solution

That's what I want to look at this morning: how can we achieve that world community at peace, with the kind of mutual respect that enables liberty and justice for all, among people with vastly diverging values? Where does hope lie? What tools do we have to get us there? We'll explore how we might help reconcile a world of disparate beliefs, a world filled with mistrust, antagonism, and sometimes even hate.

This might be a time where we'd be inclined to talk about how other people make this difficult. People who judge, people who divide, people whose fear keeps them from being open to those who are different from themselves. But we're not going there today. This morning we're going to focus on ourselves. Because I'm convinced we have more influence than we realize, and because any solution has to start by focusing inward.

There are certainly things we can do--that our faith calls us to do--to change course. Maybe if we consider them, maybe if we practice them, we can start steering things in the right direction.

And as UUs, we are charged in no uncertain terms to get there. Our Sixth Principle compels us to work toward a world community at peace, but the expectation is infused into our other principles as well. Our Seventh Principle highlights that we are connected to everyone and everything. Our First Principle instructs us to honor the inherent worth

and dignity of every person. Every person. Our Second Principle has us exercising compassion in all our human relations. For a faith that's often accused of allowing its followers to believe whatever they want, this spells out a very specific, unequivocal directive.

Embracing Diversity

In order to start down this road, and be leaders in working toward creating community, we Unitarian Universalists need to look at what we mean by diversity. For a denomination that honors the inherent dignity of every person, values compassion in human relations, and encourages acceptance of one another, we don't always do a great job of embracing true diversity of ideology.

Yes, we stand up for the disenfranchised, those discriminated against, and people and groups in need of our support--but often those people and groups aren't ones that make waves for our own liberal theology. How far do we stretch? Are we truly comfortable with unconditional diversity?

All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the second largest UU congregation in the world, says in their centennial vision statement they want their church to be "the embodiment and celebration of the world as we hope it will one day become." And by that, they don't just mean liberals living in harmony. They mean people from every class, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and political persuasion. They mean absolutely everyone.

Those of us from Judeo-Christian backgrounds are likely familiar with the lesson about the lion lying down with the lamb. It's from the book of Isaiah, and it actually goes like this: "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion together."

I think most of us process this passage through our activist nature, and interpret it to mean that the strong and the weak will live together in harmony. But there's more to the message than that. Notice it doesn't just say that lions will lie down with smaller, weaker lions. Part of the vision is of peace coming between vastly different species.

Imagine what that would mean for us as Unitarian Universalists. It means embracing political conservatives along with political liberals. It means making a place for the full spectrum of faith groups. It means gay and lesbian members of our congregation worshipping beside people who believe that same-sex marriage is wrong.

It means people outraged by examples of police violence against black Americans being in community with people who generally believe that law enforcement officers are doing a difficult job the best they can. It means environmental activists together with people who work hard every day at companies that have a devastating effect on the environment.

I think we have a way to go before our UU congregations are truly comfortable with that kind of radical diversity. And if we aren't ready for it in our own religious communities, how the heck are we going to help to create it in the larger world?

Be Aware of Our Tribes

One step we can take is becoming aware of the way that we hand-pick who we associate with, and how this can insulate us. We do this subtly, in ways we don't always notice.

For instance, we can see it in the way we choose and engage in our volunteer work. So often we get involved in fighting for our causes--abortion rights, environmental concerns, even poverty--mainly with people who are like us. We have a good sense of the beliefs of the people with whom we're aligning even before we organize with them. Think about whether this was true for you at the most recent thing you volunteered for, or the last social action event you attended.

In fact, there are social forces at work that push us to insulate ourselves among people who are like us. The incentive to be accepted by the group with whom we associate, what National Geographic has described as our "tribe," is both strong and immediate.

That incentive can play a significant role in shaping not only how we behave, but even what we believe. We all know how intensely peer pressure can come down on someone who strays outside the tribe, from the child who tries to socialize with an uncool kid on the school playground, to the member of Congress whose vote crosses party lines. So we have a strong motivator to do what our tribe does, and to embrace the beliefs it embraces.

I have been impressed by the effort your congregation has made inviting VMI cadets into your community. It's an important and compassionate act: working to connect with a group not usually recognized for its affinity with Unitarian Universalism. The language I would use here is that the two tribes don't overlap much. These kinds of efforts are so valuable, because they have the potential to add to our congregations the kind of diversity of community that we want to see in the world at large.

De-Escalation as a Tool

I hope you've noticed by now that to live the Sixth Principle, we really have to get outside of our comfort zone. Bringing peace to the world calls for us to engage with it, not wait for the world to come to us. An important tool that's available to us on this mission--one that's gotten some attention recently--is de-escalation.

In the recent heightened awareness about conflict between police and the African-American community, there's been some research highlighting the value of de-escalation as a tool in situations that have the potential to lead to violence. We need only think back to the incident earlier this week of the high school student forcibly pulled from her desk by her school's safety officer. Setting aside for now the question of right and wrong,

think how much more difficult future interactions at that school will be between students and police because the situation escalated.

De-escalation can be a valuable tool anywhere. How often on Facebook do you see status updates and memes that state a “truth” in a way that closes off meaningful conversation? Maybe by ridiculing, maybe by using selective reasoning or outright distortions. So we might think about de-escalating our rhetoric and tone, paying attention to how we express our opinions online, and not letting our Facebook page become a breeding ground for inappropriate, insensitive, or disrespectful comments.

Actively Reaching Out

We can promote peace by actively reaching out and connecting with those around us, without judging, without convincing, without debating, but by simply accepting unconditionally. Not because we agree with each other, but because in a world as beautifully diverse as ours, there is no other way to build a community at peace without sidestepping the need to reach a harmony of ideologies.

I want to share an example of this being put into practice that I witnessed a while back. I was watching an episode of the re-made TV series *Cosmos* that--just coincidentally and unrelated to my opening story--also included an explanation of evolution.

The host, physicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson, talked about the relationship between wild wolves and early humans, and how that relationship led to some wolves becoming domesticated into dogs. He patiently described both the individual animal and human interactions that came into play, and then tied those individual interactions into the larger concepts of evolutionary theory. It was one of the more elegant and accessible explanations of a scientific principle that I’ve ever heard.

But what moved me happened at the end of the segment. Dr. Tyson concluded with a brief acknowledgement that he understood some people aren’t ready to accept that this kind of evolutionary change happens in the animal kingdom. The acknowledgement wasn’t necessary to the episode. It didn’t impact the science that he was sharing. But he reached across the chasm of ideology to talk to people who might be tuning in in spite of disagreeing with his perspective.

I described this scene to some liberal friends of mine, and they were appalled that he would bother to address the “crazy” notion that evolution doesn’t occur. But that’s the point--Neil DeGrasse Tyson chose not to make that judgment, instead taking advantage of an opportunity to extend a kind gesture.

Find More Love

I never told you how things resolved at the dinner in Branson I described earlier, where our guest speaker lectured about evolution at our devoutly religious host theme park.

What happened... was that we all left at the end of the evening as friends. Not because we resolved anything, or because we talked it out and came to consensus, or even understanding. We left as friends... because we came as friends. We left as friends because for the preceding year we'd been working together, spending time together, and displaying goodwill toward each other.

Why don't we nurture more of this kind of resolution? We need to do much more of it in our daily lives, with everyone.

Nearly every major religious figure and every major denomination calls us to love one another, to exercise tolerance, and to extend fellowship. So do many secular teachings. It doesn't matter what belief system you embrace... this message is almost certainly part of your faith tradition.

So often our support and our energy is directed to specific groups with which we have some affinity. But the message of Ghandi, and Jesus, and Martin Luther King, and countless others, is that love doesn't work that way. Dr. King warned that we must all learn to live together, or perish together as fools.

We have to love before we apply a litmus test to what someone believes. And I understand that there are hateful people out there; people who want to harm others based on their beliefs. But while that's true, this message is also true: We need to find more love to encompass everyone.

Unconditional Acceptance

There's a movement out there, perpetuated mostly by the Millennial generation, called the Free Hugs Campaign, where people walk around with signs offering hugs to strangers. Free hugs. There's a YouTube video (https://youtu.be/vr3x_RRjdd4) about it that's gotten more than 77 million views, and I hope some of you are among those 77 million.

Now, I'm 50 years old--probably outside the demographic that the Free Hugs Campaign is expected to appeal to--but I love this movement. Because it represents a gesture of acceptance not tied to what someone may or may not believe.

When you're hugging a stranger, you do it without knowing what they think about God, what kind of family they come from, where they stand on Ferguson, or the environment. You don't know the extent to which they may struggle with feelings of anti-semitism or homophobia. It's an acknowledgement that we're all connected, all part of the same world that needs to find peace.

I have a friend who recently sent around a picture that someone she knows posted on Facebook. She had let the poster know she thought it was racist, and he disagreed, so to make sure she wasn't just having a super-liberal knee-jerk reaction, she asked her Facebook friends for their opinion.

I won't describe the picture, but I found it to be terribly racist. It set off a string of tirades against the person who originally posted it, and against everyone who thinks like him. It went exactly the way you'd expect socially-minded people to react. But when someone made the assumption that my friend had unfriended the guy, she indicated she hadn't. "I am hoping," she said, "that my acceptance of him will help him understand the folly of his ways."

I used to think the world would be saved by those who could elegantly argue for what's right. But now I realize it'll be saved by people who can teach us how not to. It will be saved by people who put the idea of peace ahead of their own agenda; by people who accept each other without first evaluating each other's ideologies.

The challenge we face is not one of good versus bad, or right versus wrong. It's a struggle to step around those conflicts, and embrace our common humanity.

It's the only way we'll ever be one community. And as UUs--we have already committed to pray, to work side by side, to seek better mutual understanding, with Christians, with Muslims, with Jews, with atheists.

We are already committed to embracing a diversity of beliefs, and honoring the inherent worth of every person. We are as uniquely positioned to meet this challenge as anyone, if only we can appreciate our gifts and our legacy enough to wield them wisely and confidently.

We Unitarian Universalists haven't developed our seven principles as a roadmap to guide how we interact among ourselves, or how we run our congregations. They're an ambitious framework for guiding how we interact with the entire world.

So let us honor our tradition of embracing a diversity of people, and working toward a community of peace, with the idea that the world may desperately yearn for it. And with the hope that it may follow our example.

May it be so.