



Inclusivity

Reverend Sharon Dittmar
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
513.281.1564
August 21, 2011

We are all looking for a seat at the welcome table. Even in the land of opportunity, perhaps especially at the “land of opportunity,” a welcome seat for everyone is hard to find. This summer my family went to Jamestown, the site of the first permanent settlement of English colonists in the land they named Virginia. The State of Virginia has some compelling maps in their museum. One shows the number of Powhatan Indian settlements along the soon to be renamed York and James River. Like the colonists who would follow them, the Powhatans travelled by river and through swamp land by boat to reach most of their villages, located along the riverbanks. Inland travel was rough, hot, full of dangerous illness due to the swamps, and offered lots of bugs.

A quick look of the map of the early 1600’s shows over 100 Powhatan Indian villages. In one hundred years that number would be less than ten villages, pushed farther inland, and none of them remaining on their most fertile, traditional land in the estuaries where the rivers met the ocean. It took less than 100 years to marginalize the Indians.

In another section of the museum, visitors can learn the history of the rise of tobacco in Virginia and its impact on the slave trade. Slavery was a viable institution around the world in 1600. As the European navies expanded into Africa, they bought slaves from native Africans who sold off their defeated enemy. Contrary to the general myth of the white slave catcher capturing an African, most Africans were sold out of Africa by enemy tribesmen, other Africans.

The early founding of Virginia is sobering. When slaves first arrived in Virginia shortly after English colonists, they did not have clear legal status. In this “new” land there were not law regarding slaves. They had to be created. So, in 1661, the first law was created recognizing the state of slavery in the colony of Virginia. As the laws increased, the percentage of free blacks decreased and the laws against slaves became more punitive; no slave allowed off his/her plantation after sundown, children of slaves are also slaves. All these laws that we know from the end of slavery, were at one point created, adopted into law by Virginia. After we walked through the museum my son looked at me and said “Mommy, I think we lost our soul in 1661, and I don’t think we have it back in 2011.”

I had been thinking much the same thing, but not so eloquently. I was feeling, rage. My rage started on our way to Williamsburg, when we stopped at Monticello to see the home of former President and

author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Monticello is considered an architectural gem. My first shock came when I looked at the splendor of his home and then contemplated the small (maybe 20' x 15") stone foundation of a slave cabin not 500 feet from the house. There were several of them, in a row. I wondered how many people lived in these cabins at one time.

All around me I could hear tour guides telling us about Jefferson. He was better to his slaves than other owners; he did not beat them as much. He trained his slaves to become exceptional craftsmen; masons and French chefs. Our tour guide was honest enough to tell us about Sally Hemmings, a black slave owned by Jefferson, and the irrefutable DNA that connects the descendant of her youngest child to Jefferson (probably her other children as well). Jefferson wrote thousands of letters, and due to his genius, created a machine that copied every letter as he wrote it. In all these letters there is not one mention of Sally and her children. Not once.

When Jefferson died he had an upside down mortgage, he owed more than his property was worth. He left debts. All his slaves, except five, were sold on the back lawn; that beautiful back lawn. I wanted to spit on that beautiful lawn today. How many families were separated on that day? How many slaves with the skill of a master craftsman were sold to someone who did not care?

The man who sold his library to the federal government in order to form the Library of Congress, because he valued education said that slavery was a problem, but not one that his generation could solve. We left Monticello and my son looked at me and said "He should have tried to solve it." He should have tried to solve it.

Historically the deck was stacked against Jefferson; born and married into a wealthy plantations owning family, he was deeply immersed in our developing exclusive American culture. The American plantation owners were emulating the English aristocracy, sustaining a land owning elite. It was in their culture when they arrived and they treated those unlike them in culture (Powhatans, slaves) with indifference, cruelty, and neglect. This is our American story. We have always distrusted any immigrant other than ourselves, including those who were here before us.

I came away from my vacation deeply troubled about human nature and our tendency to see differences in people instead of shared humanity. If your skin color does not match that of 17th century English colonists, and if you don't have money, in America you are treated as less worthy. I can't even manage to sugarcoat this. But it is not just Americans. Consider 17th century Africans selling their enemies into slavery. How deeply is it ingrained in humans to be exclusive and defeat the other at any expense? Even the expense of our own humanity? I am not the first, nor will I be the last person, to say that slavery eroded many things, including the souls of slaves and slave owners. It is 2011 and Americans have not yet gotten our souls back.

I planned my vacation to Virginia to be fun and educational, not morally troubling. The seeds were planted though before I left. I had already planned for our worship theme this year to be "inclusivity." The word inclusive means to "comprehend stated limits or extremes" (Merriam Webster's online). Inclusive is broad, covering many items. Inclusive is embracing, complete, comprehensive, global, universal. Inclusive is broad, real broad, broad enough to take us beyond our assumptions and limits. Inclusivity takes us into the depth and breadth of our faith, deeper into the meaning of "inherent worth

and dignity,” “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” and “acceptance of one another.” A faith of meaning challenges, inclusivity is challenging. Each of us is burdened by limited thoughts and feelings. Each of us can stretch in order to make sincere room at the welcome table. I wanted us to have an opportunity this year to safely explore who we are, and learn skills to safely explore other people, who appear to be unlike us, so that we can become more welcoming inside and out.

Like my sermon on religious freedom from last Sunday, Unitarian Universalists are divided on the issue of inclusivity. Our Universalist forbearers had an historical legacy focused on an inclusive theology of love. “God is love,” “Love is available to all people.” It is no wonder the Universalists were the first denomination in America to ordain women, and early on included African Americans in our clergy. Later, the merged Unitarian Universalist clergy agreed to perform same sex services of union in the 1970’s, when the American Medical Association still considered homosexuality an illness. We have been on the front lines of inclusivity.

We have also been on the front lines of exclusivity. Last week you heard how John Winthrop expelled Anne Hutchinson from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of her divergent ideas. Our Unitarian forbearers were wealthy and powerful. Early Unitarian churches, including this one, had pew rentals, a form of raising money by charging for pews.

This summer, my scariest moment was not a ride at an amusement park, it was reading Mark Harris’ new book *Elite*, about the history of classism in Unitarian Universalism. Harris has a whole chapter on our many Unitarian and Universalist icons who championed eugenics, the movement that advocates genetic engineering to improve our species. Now, this was a popular movement 100 years ago, and many Unitarian and Universalists were swept along, but why didn’t they use their faith to ask probing moral questions about the rights of the “disabled”, and what it meant when those rights were forcibly taken away. I am going to preach more on Harris’ book later this fall.

Harris also briefly mentions another book, *The Trouble with Diversity*. You can expect to hear more about this book as well. According to the author, Walter B. Michaels, the trouble with diversity is that Americans mistake progress on diversity with achievement and uplift for all. His question is whether or not a few hard fought and won battles on gay rights and affirmative action leave us believing our work is done, and who then is left behind. The first time I heard about this book it really irritated me. I thought it might be a book against diversity. Rather, this is a book about the limits of diversity and how a single-minded focus on diversity can blind us to other realities, like poverty and classism. This year we do not want to be limiting. We want to be broadening; inclusive enough to hold diversity and poverty together, leaving neither behind.

What does it mean to be inclusive rather than tolerant or accepting? We live in a society more and more consumed with exclusive fears about “others” (ex: immigrants) and separated by differences (e: “have and have-nots”). Recently my sister came to my house with a friend and her adolescent daughter. As my sister tells it, as they drove closer, her friend’s daughter became visibly upset and began asking “Is this a poor neighborhood? Is your sister poor?” “Why are these houses run down?” My sister was so upset that she did not know what to say.

My neighborhood is working class. Yes, some of the properties are run down and there are some financially poor people there. I could only imagine that this twelve year old has lived such an isolated

life that she has not seen a lot of people other than her upper middle class family and neighborhood. I was engaged by her question, if the neighborhood is poor am I poor? Let's be honest, a lot of us much older than twelve years old, are making the same assumption about people in my neighborhood, and perhaps me when they find out I live there. If she were my child I would have asked her what she meant by poor because there are lots of ways to be poor (money, time, love – love is the worst). I would also let her know that everyone is important and that money does not make us more or less important and that the best thing she could do if she feels unfamiliar with this neighborhood, is to get to know some of the people here, because people are people wherever they are, and everyone has something to teach everyone else.

We live very financially and racially segregated lives in America. We have since the first colonists arrived and displaced the locals. This too is America.

How can we come to a deeper understanding of our shared humanity and how can this change how we live and act, think about, and interact with others? For starters, we can learn from others unfamiliar to some of us. To this end I hope that we will see more diversity, as in different stories, in our pulpit. I have asked Mrs. Marian Spencer to be our speaker for the Carter Weekend, and she has accepted. I will be preaching on the struggles for gay couples to adopt (especially the biological children of their partners) and why they have as much right as heterosexual couples to adopt children. I hope to invite a transgendered colleague to appear in our pulpit. What can we learn from the tremendously inclusive experience of strongly combining male and female in one body?

This past summer I went to a leadership training program and heard Peter Block speak. Block is a leadership consultant, author, and teacher. Currently he works in Cincinnati, focusing on improved community dialogue and the art of hospitality through restorative circles (listening groups). Mr. Block says that only in small groups can we positively transform the world by transforming ourselves and others in conversation about good questions. He says that good questions have no answer. For example, "What is the question that if you had the answer to it, it would set you free?"

Block says that by spending time with people we don't know, we can bring hospitality into the world. Consider this, spending time to look at or speak with someone you don't know, brings hospitality, welcoming into the world. I would add that we will never understand who we are until it is safe for us to talk and listen so that we can understand who we are and where our neighbors have been and thereby understand the fullness of our race, the human race.

When I offer a nine session class on race and class this year (one class a month) we will be using Block's small group model in order to get to know one another and ask the large questions. Like me, Block is concerned by the inhospitality of the world, our coldness and detachment from ourselves and others. He quipped "They should have saved the Berlin wall and moved it to Texas." We have inherently human desires to keep away and protect ourselves from others, but this damages community in an increasingly small world.

In a world organized by instructions, I invite you to try something different here this year. If you don't like what I am offering, you don't need to come. This is merely an invitation. Let's learn about hospitality this year. Let's ask questions so big we have no answers, only thoughts and feelings. Let's forgo advice in exchange for listening. Let's be ignorant and curious together. Let us relearn the joy of

being open and vulnerable. Let us be patience enough to build relationships. Let us replace help with curiosity. Let us listen and talk face to face instead of online. Let us express gratitude for the gifts we receive from one another.

Block says that self interest is a construction. What would we find if we deconstructed our constructions? Like me, you probably cannot answer that question. It must be lived. I look forward to that living this year and in those to come. Amen.