

Identity

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

Sunday, October 8, 2017

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When I was born, in the middle of a dark Halloween night in the year 1950, I am pretty sure that the first words the doctor uttered as I emerged were “It’s a girl!” This was back in the days before they had the technology to know a baby’s gender before birth, so the fact of my femaleness was a surprise to my parents – I hope it was a happy surprise. But just that simple fact, that I was a girl, came loaded with a full package of meanings that immediately attached themselves to me. This was back in the days when being a girl implied that I would wear dresses more often than pants, and that my room would be decorated pink rather than blue. I would play with dolls, not trucks; I would date boys, not girls. It was assumed that I would probably get married to a man, get pregnant and give birth to babies; that if I did have a career outside the home it would likely be in a nurturing or caregiving role; and I was likely to live longer than most of the males born on that same day. All those identity assumptions, just because I was identified when I was born as female.

There are many other identities that attach themselves to us at the moment of conception or birth; we are born into a family that has a history, part of a tribe that has its own history. Some of us are born into a religion that is assumed to be part of our core identity. We are born on a continent and in a nation; we are born into a social class, a prescribed level of wealth and privilege that are in no way of our making. Even the timing of our birth means we are born into a generation that has a certain place in the history of our nation and our world.

I was born female, Catholic and American; I was born white and middle class. I simply absorbed all those identities, based on the identity of my parents, so the doctor did not also say, “It’s white!” or “It’s Catholic!” or “It’s middle class!” The doctor did not say any of that, but it all was nonetheless attached to me at birth as identity. I was also born right in the middle of the population explosion that followed the Second World War, so I am a Boomer. From the start, those were part of my identity, just as much as being female.

We are born into a heritage and an identity, but there comes a time when we make a choice, whether we are aware of it or not. Actually it is not just one time, but over and over again, we are presented with the opportunity to choose who we are. We choose whether to live within the identity that was handed to us – our gender and sexuality and the associated gender roles, our nation and religion and social class. Some people settle into an identity and stay there from their moment of birth, either from the comfort of a good fit, or from not believing they have a choice. Others discover, early or later in their lives, that in the core of their being they struggle with some part of the identity into which they were born, and they seek a deeper understanding, perhaps to be freed from the bonds of their old identity. For some the struggle is so difficult that they find it hard to live. And some people do choose to move into a new identity – they come out, and they emerge into the

world as someone unexpected, creating a new definition for themselves and seeking acceptance in their new and true identity.

For the past three weeks we have convened a program called “Identity Nights” here at the UU Congregation of Phoenix. Each evening focused on a different aspect of identity – this year the three topics were gender identity and sexual orientation, social class, and race. I decided I would preach on identity this morning as a follow-up to those workshops, even before I knew that we would also be holding a White Supremacy teach-in later this month, yet another part of understanding identity in American culture. There is so much rich focus on identity in our faith movement these days. This Unitarian Universalist religion calls us to look deeply at who we are, how we take our place in the world, and how we live into our deepest human values, for ourselves and for all.

The core values of Unitarian Universalism are stated in seven principles that comprise a covenantal value statement, binding our members into congregations and our congregations into community. The principles are printed in the front of our hymnals and in our order of service cover, and they proclaim our collective identity to the world. These principles also proclaim our commitment to the unique and transforming identity of every individual on this planet – affirming human worth and dignity, promoting justice, equity and compassion in our relationships; accepting one another and encouraging every person’s spiritual growth; affirming each individual’s free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The principles of our faith call us to this work of understanding and honoring all our identities, within and among ourselves, and these values call us into the position we take in the world. This mid-October weekend marks two important dates that relate directly to identity, and how the evolving ideas about who we are play out in this nation. The first is the holiday I grew up knowing as Columbus Day, and which I was taught commemorated the valiant ocean crossing of the Nina, Pinta and the Santa Maria, enabling the righteous conquest and settlement of the American hemisphere under the Doctrine of Discovery – the papal decree issued in the 15th century authorizing any European Christian nation to conquer and dominate other lands. And I now join the growing movement repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and acknowledging this date as Indigenous People’s Day, celebrating the gifts and sacrifices of the original inhabitants of these lands, and grieving the invasion by boatloads of undocumented immigrants, Western Europeans who robbed the wealth of the land and wreaked genocidal havoc on those who lived here. I now understand this history as part of the complex heritage of our nation, and it is foundational to my understanding of my work as a Unitarian Universalist minister and an American citizen.

The second commemoration this week is National Coming Out Day, which “was founded in 1988 [by leaders in the gay rights movement]; the date of October 11 was chosen because it was the anniversary of the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.” And we are reminded that identity can be dangerous, even life-threatening. On October 12, 1998, the day after that year’s National Coming Out Day, University of

Wyoming student Mathew Shepard died after being beaten and left for dead, targeted because he was gay. The shadows of violence and fear stalk the lives of so many people who are simply living into their very human identities. No wonder some people choose to hide rather than take that risk. National Coming Out Day is a celebration of the positive and courageous act of going public with one's true identity in a world where true identity can put a person in real danger.

It does take courage to come out, to move into your own true identity, however you identify, and whatever aspect of your identity you are claiming in the moment. I believe the first step for each individual in that process is to thoroughly examine and claim one's own identity, with all that it means, claiming it as a foundation from which to engage with those of other identities. That also means recognizing that we live in a society where some identities carry more privilege than others.

Acknowledging the implications of our own privilege can be deeply challenging, and it is work that we must engage with open hearts.

I am white, cis-gender, heterosexual and conventionally healthy and able, all identities that come fully loaded with privilege in our society. I am female, which is a step down the privilege ladder. I am educated middle class, a rung back up the ladder. I am neither remarkably young nor elderly, and these middle years of life also carry a certain privilege in social standing. But odd as it may seem, I do not feel particularly privileged in my day to day life. When we are treated well and can live in comfort, generally that just feels normal. People should be treated well and live in comfort, as their human birthright.

It is all too easy for me to lose track of the reality that others whose skin is a different shade, or who are differently gendered, abled, educated or aged may live a very different reality from my own. There are constant small actions and insults, what are called micro-aggressions, that remind people of their status, their place on the privilege ladder. It is all too easy for me to forget that other people -- not nameless strangers, but people I know and whose gifts I value in my life -- do not share the relative safety, comfort and security that I experience in my identity. So many others are not treated well, do not live in comfort, or perhaps know that their current treatment and comfort are always at risk simply because of their identity.

I participated in all three of the recent identity nights here, and I have been very interested in the feedback we received. Some feedback was deeply positive, but I heard many comments throughout the process from those who were not comfortable that we divided people out into same-identity groups. Some comments expressed that dividing humanity is just wrong, because we are all one united humanity, all the same in our essence. Other commenters wished we had mixed the groups because they wanted to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of those of other identities. And I have thought long and hard about those comments.

One thing I have learned from wise friends and colleagues who are people of color, and those of non-normative gender or sexual orientation, or who have a disability, is that we are not all one united humanity. Our human essences do vary – variety is part of being human -- and we live differently in this society based on characteristics that are generally not under our control. The luxury of not noticing difference, of assuming a common essence in humanity, is one aspect of privilege. People of privilege have the luxury of not paying attention to difference – while those who are not privileged are constantly reminded of the identity differences that dictate the ways they are treated.

When I talk to a respected member of this congregation who does not feel safe driving on Lincoln Drive because they fear racial profiling by the police; when I know someone who cannot advance in their profession because of an identity or ability difference that is unrelated to their competence; when we get feedback that people appreciated the separated identity groups where they finally had a safe place to be themselves – all those instances remind me that while I might have the luxury of not noticing difference, others do not share that luxury in our world. I am reminded not to assume that others feel safe in the world, just because I do; I am reminded not to assume that I have the right to ask them to share their identity experience with me, when I have so much to learn about my own identity, my areas of more or less privilege, and my areas of unknowing.

Ignoring, or pretending to ignore, a person's gender or race or disability may be felt by them as disrespectful, since that is a core part of who they are. Attending respectfully to difference may be a skill we all need to learn. We heard from those who gathered in the less-privileged identity groups on those recent Thursday evenings that they were grateful for the opportunity to speak in confidence in a protected environment, to exchange perceptions and experiences with others who shared their identity, and on one occasion we heard from them that their safety felt violated when those in privileged status joined their discussion. I suspect that I am not alone as I continue to grapple with what it means to have a privileged identity in a society that is structured like a ladder, a society ordered in large part on the dictates of white supremacy, a ladder on which some are higher up and others lower down ... a society in which so many experience discrimination and disrespect, while I so readily take the gifts of my privilege as my due, no more or less than what is natural. There is so much to learn, so much work to do.

How could anyone ever tell you that you are anything less than beautiful? How can we work to create a society that affirms all the identities of each human being as beautiful and perfect just as they are, in all their complexity and all their becoming? As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to the deep work of identity, not because it is easy or comforting but rather because it is challenging, it leads us to question so much of what we have been taught, so much of what we assume. We are all precious children of this planet, and we are called to create a social order that honors the worth and dignity of every person, seeking to grow in compassion and to create justice wherever we can. In all our ages, all our genders and sexualities and social classes; in our many colors and shapes and sizes, in all our many identities, we are a people of history and heritage living into the future that we dream might be.

Sources:

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