INTENTIONAL DIVERSITY

Good morning everyone. A sixteen-letter word with seven syllables has been at the top of the agenda for us UUs for at least a decade now—multiculturalism. The annual General Assembly of our denomination looks more diverse every year, but here in the north country we’re still majority Caucasians and there’s not much we can do about that, since our neighborhood is not rich in ethnic and racial diversity. Most of us have multicultural ancestry, and we do represent a variety of sexual identities and physical disabilities, but diversity is much bigger than the obvious—it also includes many chosen characteristics—intentional diversity. All of us have demonstrated a preference for some varieties of minority group status, intentionally setting ourselves apart from the mainstream. To get into this topic, think of some celebrity—someone in show business, sports, or politics who seems to be deliberately, shockingly different, wanting to be seen as one of a kind. You don’t have to admire or like this person, just think of the most unusual, outrageous image you can name—for example, Lady Gaga.

Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta was born in New York City and did not become Lady Gaga till her talent began to impact the music world. Stories about the origin of the name Gaga are told and retold, but they all agree that it was her spontaneous and intentional rejection of her given name that launched her transformation into a pop star. The new name set off a chain reaction of shockingly weird costumes and songs that is still continuing. Lady Gaga will never be confused with anyone else, and that seems to be her ultimate objective, a form of diversity chosen and developed year by year to maintain a state of extreme individuality. When UUA President Peter Morales uses the word ‘multiculturalism’ he’s talking about broad social categories of minority groups—racial, ethnic, economic, political, linguistic, and sexual. The people we’ve thought of today—Gaga, Madonna, Justin Bieber or maybe even Jesse Ventura came to mind because of their chosen forms of diversity.

As members of the most liberal religious group in the United States, we have chosen to distinguish ourselves from bigger, mainline organizations. UUism is a religious minority group which we belong to not by birth but by choice, a form of intentional diversity. We did not make this choice just to be different, as Lady Gaga may have done, but because we are who we are, and the choice implies other attitudes, including a willingness to advocate for beliefs and values that set us apart from the mainstream. Wherever we started from, whatever roads we traveled to get here, we arrived and felt a sense of kinship, a comfort level not found in other religious settings. The central character in the movie Dances with Wolves—a white man who joined a Native American tribe, felt a greater kinship with that culture than his own. Many individuals have learned foreign languages and chosen to live in other countries, leaving their original culture behind. UU churches and fellowships everywhere are filled with former Catholics and other renegades.

In the autumn of 1959, a white American named John Howard Griffin chose to find out what it felt like to be Black. He went to the home of a good friend in New Orleans, where, under the care of a dermatologist, he underwent a regimen of doses of the drug Methoxsalen and spent up to fifteen hours daily under an ultraviolet lamp. Gradually his appearance changed so radically that after the treatments, people who knew John Howard Griffin as a white man did not recognize him. This preparation led to the book Black Like Me, which told of his journey around the South in disguise. Second-hand knowledge shared by true Afro-Americans had not prepared him for the reality of living in a black skin. He wrote of what he called “the hate stare” which was given to him by men and women of his true culture everywhere he went. The book was a best-seller in the sixties, as the civil rights movement began and interracial relationships in America underwent the change that is still evolving.

Now we have the phenomenon of Paula Dean, a woman with a successful career in TV and the food industry, suddenly robbed of all that by a slip of the tongue. She has wept, apologized, rationalized, and prayed for help from God. It’s clear that Paula does not understand what racism is or what intelligent people perceive lying behind that slip of the tongue. Imagine if her prayers were answered—if the God she believes in would speak to her, offering this bargain: “Paula, I have heard your repentance and I have decided to answer your prayer. I will...
restore your position, the TV show, the sales contracts, your popularity. Just one small change must be made, and you must agree to this before I can restore your fortune.” Gratefully she answers, “Oh, thank you Lord, yes of course, anything you say.” God would say no more, but just zap Paula Dean, and what do you think she would do when she looks in the mirror and sees not her familiar white face, but the dark face of an Afro-American woman? As the instinctive hate stare sets in, would she then get the message?

As a kid I lived in Louisville, Kentucky in a working class neighborhood, where I was the token Protestant in a nest of Catholics. My playmates went to school at Saint Columbus while I went to the public school. Their teachers were black-robed nuns, while mine looked like my mother. All of us were English-speaking Caucasians, but their ancestors were urban Irish, while mine were hillbillies from rural Appalachia — what some people called white trash. As a member of the ethnic minority group in the neighborhood, I was further marginalized by two personal traits—I was physically fragile and could not play rough games, and I was smart. So the cards were stacked against me. I would always be excluded from the social life of my peers. That made me angry. I felt like a wolf in sheep’s clothing—a good little girl internally growling. The stage was set for a lifetime of protesting against any and every form of exclusion. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in the schools must stop, and my wolf leaped out of the woods with a joyful roar. I chose to become a person for whom the Paula Deans have another ugly word, also starting with the letter ‘n’.

In Louisville all schools were segregated, and integration did not begin there till years later, after Little Rock forced the issue. In 1958 at the University of Louisville I joined a group of radical students and moved into a little apartment, where my friends came to visit. We didn’t party, we talked—politics, religion, ethics, philosophy, sometimes till the wee hours of the morning. My friends were multicultural, including students from Africa, and this had been noticed by my neighbors. Racism literally knocked on my door in the form of my landlord. He said he was sorry but he’d have to ask me to move. But history was on MY side, as a rumbling like distant thunder preceded the civil rights movement. Lightning flashed as the modern day prophet stepped up on the stage, and a working woman named Rosa Parks, accused of the crime of sitting down, was fingerprinted by the Birmingham police. This history is summarized in the movie, The Butler.

Before Martin Luther King, Afro-Americans seldom lifted their heads and looked us white folks in the eye. Dr. King chose to stop looking down, and no American of my generation will ever forget the tidal wave of change set off by that choice. Stepping to the beat of a different drummer, Dr. King intentionally separated himself from the Afro-American mainstream and at first the majority did not follow. Only after the letter from Birmingham jail to his Black clergy colleagues did some of them find the courage to choose a new self-image and way of living. For the next few years the black community was divided between the majority, who were afraid (and who could blame them for that) and the minority, who realized they now had a choice. The rest is history, and now we have Trayvon Martin. UUs, still dominated by white faces despite our fervent wish to be multicultural, are choosing diversity by standing with the black community. We are Trayvon Martin, and all the Afro-Americans who now stand up and look us in the eye, challenging us to look back as equals. That turnabout was purchased at a very high price, paid in part by people like us who intentionally chose to sacrifice our favored position in the mainstream to play a part in changing this nation.

Then Dr. King chose another form of diversity, separating himself from the mainstream by marching for peace, in opposition to the war in Viet Nam. By that time I was married, with four children. Some UU parents are torn about what they pass on to their children. We are who we are, and the kids know what we believe. But they are who they are, and must remain free to decide what they believe. In those days I was not yet aware of that distinction, and I served up bowls full of social justice to my kids for breakfast, lunch and dinner. My passion became part of them and all four found their own ways to express it. When our oldest son Willie was twelve we were marching somewhere—a throng of people following a coffin filled with guns which we planned to bury in a public park as a symbol of our commitment to peace. I lost track of Willie in the crowd, and later found that he
had worked his way to the front lines and become one of those carrying the coffin. Today he’s committed to the UU fellowship of Conejo Valley, California, where he is surrounded by friends and fellow defenders of justice, all of whom have intentionally chosen diversity.

It’s interesting to consider why and how we find ourselves part of a chosen minority group. Excluded from my peer group in childhood, I somehow knew that was a violation of ethics much bigger than myself. In Louisville segregation was a mixed bag—buses, shopping areas, and drive-in movies were not segregated, but schools, restaurants, bars and movie theaters were. My best girlfriend and I began dating across the color line and visiting the black bars, where the music was a lot better than anywhere else. For some reason police cars were always cruising by those bars and we felt the disapproving glances. The wolf in my heart had a nose for injustice—the scrub of her neck bristled at what I now know was racial profiling. During that period I met other protesters like myself, who became true friends, and fellow workers for equality. My value system clarified, and I separated from the religious body I had been part of, thinking I had become an atheist, having no idea that the work of social justice had become, as it is today, the very heart of my spirituality.

Not everyone feels OK being in the minority. We can’t explore the reasons for that now, but we all know that the balance of power is shifting in America. For decades the conservative camp was the majority in government at all levels, now that is changing, the conservative base has divided into different camps, and they do NOT feel OK about that. Their discomfort makes headlines as they attack each other. This happened to Christianity in the fifteen-hundreds, when Martin Luther nailed his manifesto on the door of the cathedral. Roman Catholicism had been Christianity in the western world since the time of Christ, but the Protestant Reformation ushered in hundreds of years of fighting, persecution and fragmentation. To this day many sects and denominations battle for majority status, each one claiming ownership of the only truth. Unitarian-Universalism has not been part of that war since the 1700s. That makes us a minority group among the array of American religious bodies.

The right to choose is a concept some of our UU ancestors died for. We who have chosen diversity will not be burned at the stake like Servetus, but we may always be a minority group, pursuing a life of activism. Having defended the minorities of the human species, we will move on to defend the rights of other species. Elephants, tigers, horses, pit bulls, your Grandma’s cat and the puppies being sold like objects. We will advocate for the health of the planet, becoming tree-huggers and defenders of wild flora and fauna. We will be condemned by self-aggrandizing voices for human superiority. Gun control, respect for languages other than English, the right to live and the right to die will separate us from the mainstream and test our commitment to intentional diversity.

When social justice issues separate Christians, they turn to the Bible, which is sort of like a frying pan—by itself the Bible is an inanimate object. A good cook can use it to cook up a nourishing meal or a fundamentalist can whang you over the head with it. Once upon a time in the great city of Boston, a Unitarian wolf named Theodore Parker howled at the Calvinists for ramming the Bible down the throats of ordinary people. When social justice knocks at our door, it may come in the familiar form of some issue we’ve known for years and we’ll say oh no, not YOU again. For instance, racism, for which I marched and organized and found out what tear gas smells like. Or there’s the old issue of abortion, now being hauled out again with new rhetoric. They want to criminalize a personal, medical subject, and demonize women. As hope and courage rise, people need to know there is a place where the fight for social justice has been chosen, where respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person is principle number one. We CARE at a deep level about each other, and our ability to impact our world, to feed the hungry, protect the innocent, bury the guns, bless the lovers—all of that is spiritual work, and this sacred space is the scene where we enact our spirituality while building collective strength.

Let me end with this postscript. The home where I grew up is gone now. An Interstate highway cut through the old Louisville neighborhood. Even the grade school where I learned that I am a female and males are different, that too is gone. As Thomas Wolfe said you can’t go home again. Now this is a mystical concept—home is within
you. Every person you have ever been, from the child who had to learn your gender, color, abilities and disabilities, likes and dislikes, to the person you are today—every stop along the way from THEN to NOW is still within you, the building blocks of your belief system, your spiritual truth. HOME is your own personhood, the hearth of the spirit, where embers glow, and love dwells. We rise up to advocate for the interdependent web of all existence, defending our own personhood. That is the claim on our lives of the principles we have chosen. May the force be with you. Amen

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