

Different Rooms  
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, September 18, 2016

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to your Board of Trustees who spent yesterday together in a retreat. A good portion of the retreat was used to explore and understand the nature of interim ministry in order to get the most out of my time with you. I can assure you that your elected leaders are thoughtful, caring, and committed to strengthening this congregation and promoting Unitarian Universalist values in the world. (Invite board members to stand.)

There's a story about a man who arrived at the pearly gates and was met by St. Peter. Opening the gates, St. Peter said, "Let us begin with a tour." The gates opened into a large hall where there was singing and laughing and dancing going on. People of all ages, sizes, and colors seemed to be happy and joyful. As St. Peter and the new arrival made their way across the great hall, St. Peter pointed out the lavish banquet tables and the rooms off the great hall with comfortable seating for playing games or for quiet conversation. The hall was filled with a joyful noise. St. Peter and the new arrival came to the end of the great hall where there were two rooms with closed doors. As they approached the doors, St. Peter said, "Shhh. We have to be very quiet here." "Why?" asked the new arrival. St. Peter said, pointing to the room on the right, "That room is for the Baptists. They think they're the only ones here." The new arrival nodded their head and asked, "What about the room on the left?" Said St. Peter, "That room is for the Unitarian Universalists. They don't believe they're here."

This is not to say that all Baptists are self-righteous. There's plenty of that across the religious spectrum. It is also not to say that all Unitarian Universalists share the same doubts. The story does have something to say about how we perceive others and how others perceive us. Within the story are echoes of the scripture passage where Jesus tells his disciples that his father's mansion has many rooms. This passage can be interpreted to mean that no matter who you are or where you came from, there is room for you in the kingdom of God; there is room for Baptist and Unitarian Universalists, for Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, for Catholics and Protestants, for believers and for atheists. The story speaks to the truth that no one holds the corner on truth.

The late Forrest Church, who served for many years as the Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan used the metaphor of one light through many windows to express the same idea. He envisioned what he called a cathedral of the world, one large room with many windows. The light shining through the

windows looks different depending on where you happen to be in the room. Since everyone has a different perspective, everyone perceives the light differently. Since no one person can see every perspective, we need each other to gain a greater understanding of the light. Forrest Church used the metaphor of the cathedral of the world with one light through many windows to describe Unitarian Universalism, Unitarianism being the one light, or one life, one God, unified and indivisible and Universalism being the multiple expressions of that one light.

There's another story that has become central to my ministry. It is likely that you will hear it again during my time here with you. The story takes place on a cruise ship off the coast of Japan. A man who had saved his whole life to take this cruise stood for a long time at the rail of the ship looking across the ocean toward the land. The longer he stood there, the more despondent he became, a despondence that was visible on his face, so much so that one of his fellow passengers became concerned. She approached him gently to ask why he was so down in the dumps on what was supposed to be the cruise of a lifetime. He responded by saying that all the brochures had promised that this would be the day that he would see Mt. Fuji rising in the distance. Apparently, though, the haze that covered the water was not going to lift. It was just his luck that he had travelled all this way and was not going to see Mt. Fuji. The woman responded by saying, "Look higher." The man raised his eyes to see above the haze, and there was the beauty and grandeur of the magnificent peak.

We all need to be reminded to look higher, to set our vision on lofty ideals, or as Robert Browning put it, "A person's reach must exceed their grasp, else what's a heaven for." Sometimes we need another person to help us see what's possible if only we look higher, or in the words of Mark Morrison Reed, "alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen . . ."

The story is about how we need each other to expand our vision, and there is something more. The story tells of only two people among what could have been hundreds on the same boat. Though they were on a shared voyage, each of them has a different experience. For example, any who stood at the opposite rail of the ship would not have seen Mt. Fuji at all, but would have seen a vast expanse of ocean. Those whose cabins were on the lower decks would experience the voyage differently than those with cabins on the upper decks. In other words, there is not a singular narrative to be told about the cruise, but there are many stories.

The same can be said of congregational life, this shared journey toward greater wisdom, greater understanding, greater compassion, and greater wholeness.

In October, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro will celebrate a 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. During the entire month, we'll be gathering memories and stories. Be watching your weekly eNews for a schedule of events and the many ways you can participate in the month-long celebration. Part of what we'll be doing is creating a timeline. We'll need multiple perspectives in order to get a sense of the wholeness of the congregation. We need to hear about its joys and its struggles, its successes and its failures. There is no singular narrative that is the official history of the church. Rather, it is a collection of stories told from multiple perspectives. Even events that were shared were experienced and perceived differently by different people. Just as there are many interpretations of scripture, different people will interpret past events differently. The idea is not to arrive at an agreed upon version of the story, but to create a space that holds all the stories and all the perceptions.

I learned about differences in perception during the early years of my marriage to a man who happens to be color-blind. Actually, the term color-blind is a misnomer because it isn't that he doesn't see color, it's just that he sees color differently than the majority of people do. By the way, it is with his permission that I tell you this story. In the early years of our marriage, we were both in a lot of denial about the reality of his condition. We argued a lot about color. What I see as blue, he sees as pink. What I see as green, he sees as brown. In the early years, we spent a lot of time trying to make the other see things our way, until one day, we realized how silly that was. The truth is that we see the world differently. Literally. I can't see the world through his eyes and he can't see the world through mine. Once we quit arguing about who was right and who was wrong, we instead got curious about what the other was seeing. We've learned to apply this same curiosity to all the ways people see the world differently. Because we see things differently, we arrive at different conclusions. Seeing the world from multiple perspectives and through different perceptual lenses makes it more complex, more wondrous, and more beautiful.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker scholar and teacher has an approach to life that I strive to emulate. He says, "When the going gets tough, turn to wonder." I have a button that sits on my desk at home. It reads "Less Judgment. More Curiosity."

We are differently and wonderfully made. We come from different rooms. We see the one light through many windows. We have different experiences of shared events. We need each other if we are to lift our vision higher and see all that must be seen.

One way we do this as Unitarian Universalists is to come together in small groups – Chalice Circles as they are called in this congregation. These groups come together once a month to share individual thoughts, feelings, ideas, and perspectives about a common theme, all with the intent of deep sharing and deep listening. Chalice Circles are about intimacy and ultimacy. They draw us closer in community and they draw us closer to wisdom and truth. They connect our individual lives with something larger than our selves. Chalice Circles are now forming. You can find out more about Chalice Circles by visiting the table in the foyer which is where you can also sign up to be in a chalice circle.

We arrive out of many singular rooms, each with our own experiences, perspectives, and perceptions. Ours is a bold faith that claims to make room for all who would join with us in our covenant of love and service. This is no small task we have set for our selves. It means admitting that no one of us holds the corner on truth, and this is never easy. It means that we must learn to listen to one another with respect even when we disagree. It is a skill that is much needed in our world today, a world that is broken and torn by mistrust and even hatred of any who are different from the dominant culture.

My charge for you this day, as you move out of this sanctuary and into the world is this:

Know that the way you perceive the world is good and valid. Know that your way of perceiving the world isn't the only way nor is it the whole truth. Try seeing the world through the eyes of another, someone who sees things differently than you do. Try to do this with a sense of wonder. Try less judgment and more curiosity. Ask lots of questions. Listen deeply to the answers. Notice how it changes your vision. Notice how it changes your heart. This is how we learn to trust each other. This is how we create the beloved community where there is a room for everyone. This is how we change the world to be more just, more free, more compassionate, and more loving.

May we make it so through our living.