

# Connecting

*Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship*

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## Pluralism

### Chalice Lighting

Words of Kathleen Norris: “True hospitality is marked by an open response to the dignity of every person. It is receiving the stranger on his own terms, and may be offered only by those who have found the center of their lives in their own hearts.”

### Check In

How is it with you today? How has the last month been?

### Pluralism in the Proposed U.U.A. Article II Bylaws

#### Section C-2.2 Values and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these values are: . . .

**Pluralism.** We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The five other values named, with 2-3 sentences on each: interdependence, justice, transformation, generosity, equity.

## READINGS

Read these pieces with a pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.

### Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Milton Bennett

**Stage 1: Denial.** The inability to construe cultural difference. Indicated by benign stereotyping (well-meant but ignorant or naive observations) and superficial statements of tolerance. May sometimes be accompanied by attribution of deficiency in intelligence or personality to culturally deviant behavior. Tendency to dehumanize outsiders. Isolation in homogeneous groups fails to generate either the opportunity or the motivation to construct relevant categories for noticing and interpreting cultural difference. Separation from cultural difference protects world view from change. Some awareness of cultural difference may yield undifferentiated broad categories, such as "foreigner" or "Asian" or "Black."

Features of the Denial Stage:

- No categories ("what difference?") or only broad categories for different cultures.
- Benign on the surface ("live and let live"), but potentially genocidal when pressed into cross-cultural contact.
- Aggressive ignorance ("I don't need to know"), stress on the familiar.
- Possibility of exploitation.

At this stage, learners say:

- "Live and let live, that's what I say."
- "All big cities are the same-lots of buildings, too many cars, McDonalds."
- "What I really need to know about is art and music."
- "As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem."
- "The main concerns I have involve knowing how to get around and ordering in restaurants."
- "With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort."
- "I never experience culture shock."
- "All I need to know about is politics and history; I can figure out the rest of it as I go along."

Developmental task: To recognize the existence of cultural differences.

**Stage 2: Defense.** Recognition of cultural difference coupled with negative evaluation of most variations from native culture -- the greater the difference, the more negative the evaluation. Characterized by dualistic us/them thinking and frequently accompanied by overt negative stereotyping. Evolutionary view of cultural development with native culture at the acme. A tendency towards social/cultural proselytizing of "underdeveloped" cultures. Existing cultural world view is protected by exaggerating its positive aspects compared to all other cultures. Any neutral or positive statement about another culture may be interpreted as an attack.

The Defense stage may manifest in **Reversed** form: Tendency to see another culture as superior while maligning one's own. Dualistic thinking is identical; only the poles are reversed.

Features of the Defense Stage:

- Better elaborated categories for cultural difference, but original world view is protected by poor integration of the new categories (hardening of the categories).
- State of siege; defense of privilege and defense of identity.

- Same-culture segregation; "backlash" actions; possible support for supremacist and hate groups.
- Exclusionary denial of equal opportunity.

At this stage, learners say:

- "I wish these people would just talk the way we do."
- "Even though I'm speaking their language, they're still rude to me."
- "When you go to other cultures, it makes you realize how much better the U.S. is."
- "These people don't value life the way we do."
- "Boy, could we teach these people a lot of stuff."
- "What a sexist society!"
- "These people are so urbane and sophisticated, not like the superficial people back home."
- "I am embarrassed by my compatriots, so I spend all my time with the host country nationals."
- "I wish I could give up my own cultural background and really be one of these people."

Developmental task: Mitigate polarization by emphasizing "common humanity"

**Stage 3: Minimization.** Recognition and acceptance of superficial cultural differences such as eating customs, etc., while holding that all human beings are essentially the same. Emphasis on the similarity of people and commonality of basic values. Tendency to define the basis of commonality in ethnocentric terms (i.e., since everyone is essentially like us, "just be yourself"). A person at this stage tends to emphasize commonality of human beings in terms of physiological similarity. (e.g., "After all, we're all human!") or spiritual status (e.g., "We are all children of God").

Features of the Minimization Stage:

- World view is protected by attempting to subsume difference into familiar superordinate categories ("deep down we're all the same").
- Insistently nice.
- Active support for universal religious, moral, or political principles.
- Acceptance of institutionalized privilege.

At this stage, learners say:

- "The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself -- authentic and honest!"
- "Customs differ, of course, but when you really get to know them they're pretty much like us."
- "I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture."
- "Technology is bringing cultural uniformity to the developed world"
- "While the context may be different, the basic need to communicate remains the same around the world."
- "No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things."
- "If people are really honest, they'll recognize that some values are universal."
- "It's a small world, after all!"

Developmental task: Develop cultural self-awareness

**Stage 4: Acceptance.** Recognition and appreciation of cultural differences in behavior and values. Acceptance of cultural differences as viable alternative solutions to the organization of human existence. Cultural relativity. The beginning of ability to interpret phenomena within context. Categories of difference are consciously elaborated. Emphasis is on how behaviors and values are always within a cultural context.

Features of the Acceptance Stage:

- Differentiation and elaboration of cultural categories; development of a metalevel view of cultural difference, including one's own culture

- Curiosity
- Acquisition of knowledge about cultures, including one's own
- Avoidance of exercising power (liberal paralysis)

At this stage, learners say:

- "The more difference the better -- more difference equals more creative ideas!"
- "You certainly wouldn't want to have all the same kind of people around -- the ideas get stale, and besides, it's boring."
- "I always try to study about a new culture before I go there."
- "The more cultures you know about, the better comparisons you can make."
- "Sometimes it's confusing, knowing that values are different in various cultures and wanting to be respectful, but still wanting to maintain my own core values."
- "When studying abroad, every student needs to be aware of relevant cultural differences."
- "I know my homestay family and I have had very different life experiences, but we're learning to work together."
- "Where can I learn more about Mexican culture to be effective in my communication?"

Developmental task: Refine analysis of cultural contrasts

**Stage 5: Adaptation.** The development of communication skills that enable intercultural communication. Effective use of empathy, or frame of reference shifting, to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries.

Ability to consciously shift perspective into alternative cultural world view elements and act in culturally appropriate ways in those areas. Internalization of more than one complete world view. Behavior shifts completely into different frames without much conscious effort.

Features of the Adaptation Stage:

- Knowledge and behavior are linked by conscious intention; category boundaries become more flexible and permeable
- Cultural competencies
- Intentional perspective-taking, empathy
- Ability to recognize and respond to power in cultural context; some ability to exercise power appropriately in alternative contexts

At this stage, learners say:

- "To solve this dispute, I'm going to have to change my approach."
- "I know they're really trying hard to adapt to my style, so it's fair that I try to meet them halfway."
- "I greet people from my culture and people from the host culture somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated."
- "I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways."
- "In a study abroad program, every student should be able to adapt to at least some cultural differences."
- "To solve this dispute, I need to change my behavior to account for the difference in status between me and my counterpart from the other culture."
- "I'm beginning to feel like a member of this culture."
- "The more I understand this culture, the better I get at the language."

Developmental task: Develop frame of reference shifting skills

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## How Plural Can We Be?

Meredith Garmon

Through the decades, I have been with many, many groups of Unitarian Universalists in which the question was asked, “What drew you to Unitarian Universalism?” I’ve found that two basic answers predominate. The number one answer is some variation of: “At last, hallelujah, I found a place where people think like me.” A number us love this place because, we report, we can be ourselves here. We can be understood by people who share our assumptions, our values – and our prejudices.

The number two answer is the opposite: “I love how different people are here. I love the diversity I find – everybody’s got different ideas. It’s very stimulating” – or variations on that theme.

The fact is we do have a fair degree of theological diversity: we have Christians, Buddhists, humanists, pagans. Some of us are vehemently agnostic – finding it particularly important to emphasize not knowing – and just about all of us are at least nominally agnostic just in the sense that we’re polite enough not to claim that we’re certain we’re right (even if secretly we feel pretty sure we are). Some of us put the emphasis on what we do believe, and some put the emphasis on what we don’t.

We are a diverse lot, theologically. We are not such a diverse lot ethnically, or in terms of socio-economic class. We are not such a diverse lot politically. And even theologically, people with conservative forms of their religion are probably not going to be comfortable here.

We say everyone is welcome in our congregation. And we do mean it. At the same time, if a person makes us uncomfortable, we probably make *zir* uncomfortable – and *ze* won’t come, or won’t come back. We don’t have to say anyone is unwelcome because we can pretty much count on it that the people who stay will be basically like us.

Of course, I understand how good it feels to be among one’s own people, to be with the people who think like you, people among whom you can relax and be yourself, and don’t have to be afraid you’ll say the wrong thing.

At the same time, we are called to connect with people who are very *other*. Here are some examples of cases that have in recent years challenged the inclusivity of some Unitarian Universalist congregations:

- A young woman with an infant in her arms who, when the baby starts to whimper during the service, begins breastfeeding;
- A Native American with long dark hair and tribal dress;
- A man from a Pentecostal background who waves his hands in the air during the singing of every hymn;
- A person who speaks out of turn and can’t follow the hymns and seems to be mentally ill;
- A well-dressed opposite-sex couple: the man has an American flag in the lapel of his suit, and they have their Bibles with them;

- A homeless man who hasn't bathed in a week – and whose clothes have evidently been worn daily without being laundered for longer than that;
- A couple whose smiles reveal that neither of them have enjoyed the benefits of a lifetime of reasonable dental care;
- A nudist (man? woman? old? young?) who wants to attend Sunday service nude;
- A woman with a guide dog;
- A man who mentions during the social hour that he has just been released from prison – where he was serving time on a conviction for child pornography;
- A person who, during the social hour, mentions the color of people's auras;
- A service man back from Afghanistan, in uniform, visiting with his aunt and uncle;
- A 21-year-old who just graduated from a West coast college and has moved here to find his first job. He knows no one in town, and he is African American;
- A woman, skin-tone consistent with being middle-eastern, wearing head covering we recognize as the Muslim Hijab;
- A man with wearing confederate flag insignia who takes every opportunity in conversation to say the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery, but was about states' rights;
- A couple wearing large “Trump 2024” buttons;
- A group of Latino youth who speak among themselves in Spanish;
- A forty-year old man who comes in holding hands with a woman – and his other hand is holding hands with another woman.

Some of these may strike you as “no problem.” Others, perhaps, give you pause. Which ones? And which ones are “no problem” only as long as there are only a few of them, or irregularly attending?

One or two cases like these each week, and most of us are OK. They might come a few times, but they probably don't stick around. What if they did? What if they stayed and weren't going anywhere and half the people at First Unitarian Church of Des Moines, week after week, for a couple years fit one or more of the above descriptions?

This place wouldn't be your comfortable social club of like-minded friends anymore. What then? Would you then become the one who, not comfortable, stopped coming? Or would you delight in this challenge to expand your circle of “us”?



*I wrote “Dwell in an Artist’s House” in 2005-06, when LoraKim and I were the half-time-each co-ministers to the Unitarian Universalist Community of El Paso. With the other half of my time that year I was the solo half-time minister to the small Unitarian Universalist Church of Midland, Texas – 300 miles from El Paso. Each month, I’d fly out to Midland for 10 days, overlapping with two Sundays. While in Midland, I accepted the home hospitality of a congregant. For some of those months, this meant staying in the home of a UU who was an artist, which experience produced the poem below.*

*It’s the job of an artist to be original, to see things in new ways and show us new ways to see. Being in a highly plural community can also show us new ways to see, even though, perhaps, no one is especially trying to. Do the lines in some metaphorical way describe being in diverse community? How is living amid pluralism similar to being a guest of an artist?*

### Dwell in an Artist’s House

Meredith Garmon

Live in an artist’s house for a time  
If you can  
Dwell among the strange ceramic on  
display  
in small groups and singly in each  
conceivable nook  
they spot you at every turn  
textures remind you of a dim possibility  
shapes sing a Psalm of hands  
colors give your eyeballs breath.

Yes, live in an artist’s house for a spell  
If you get the chance  
Gaze over the books on the artist’s shelves  
take in these shapes and titles  
the thick ones and the thin  
the smell of their unsettled settledness  
the scope of restless interests  
Someone here has wanted to know  
everything, everything important,  
And could not stay in one place too long.  
Pull down a volume of poetry you never  
heard of,  
with a style half-way between familiar and  
exotic  
And limn the pages, a few each day,

Leaf through the art books, Gauguin,  
Wyeth  
Let these be your companions for the  
week.

Live in an artist’s house a while  
And on Sunday stroll down to the artist’s  
church  
and take worship with the small besieged  
band of freethinkers  
vaguely wishing they could believe more  
than they do in salvific things:  
love, justice, redemption.

Feel the artist’s lifelong care, the slow-  
swift  
passing of his years, in the shape of his  
house,  
Mold yourself to that shape  
Sleep there with infected dreams  
For a week or two at a time  
And recurrently, if at all possible.

Dwell in an artist’s spare fecund space  
And when you leave say, “Thanks again”  
Surprised by how much you mean it.

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*As pluralism puts us in the position of guest, it also puts us in the position of host to its motley diversity. The spiritual task is to welcome difference – which Rumi suggests begins with welcoming the diversity of feelings and vicissitudes of life. Ryan Wilson illustrates difficulties of welcoming strangers.*

### The Guest House

Jalaluddin Rumi; trans. Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

### Xenia

Ryan Wilson

One day a silent man arrives  
At your door in an outdated suit,  
Threadbare and black, like a lost mourner  
Or a Bible salesman who's been robbed.  
Penniless, he needs a place to stay.  
And you, magnanimous you, soon find  
This stranger reading in your chair,  
Eating your cereal, drinking your tea,  
Or standing in your clothes at the window  
Awash in afternoon's alien light.

You tire of his constant company.  
Your floorboards creak with his shuffling  
footfalls,  
Haunting dark rooms deep in the night.  
You lie awake in blackness, listening,  
Cursing the charity or pride  
That opened up the door for him  
And wonder how to explain yourself.  
He smells like durian and smoke  
But it's mostly his presence, irksome,  
fogging  
The mind up like breath on a mirror . . .

You practice cruelty in a mirror,  
Then practice sympathetic faces.  
You ghoul. Your cunning can't deceive  
you.  
You are afraid to call your friends  
For help, knowing what they would say.  
It's just you two. You throw a fit when  
He sneaks water into the whisky bottle,  
Then make amends. You have no choice  
Except to learn humility,  
To love this stranger as yourself,  
Who won't love you, or ever leave.



## Be Curious, Not Judgmental

S. M. Nash

*Be Curious, Not Judgmental.* When something happens that you don't want to happen. When you don't get what you want. When somebody else does it better than you. *Be curious, not judgmental.*

When you hear NO rather than YES. When it's just taking too long. When you're listening to a story with an obvious ending. *Be curious, not judgmental.*

When the same thing keeps happening to you, again and again. When somebody is saying something (saying anything). When you're having the same negative thoughts in your head. *Be curious, not judgmental.*

When you feel awful inside. When the world outside feels scary. When you just don't know what to do. *Be curious, not judgmental.*

When the path seems to come to an end. When the money runs out. When the words dry up. *Be curious, not judgmental.*

How to be curious? Don't be judgmental, that's how. And listen for a feeling. Because being judgmental has a certain feeling to it, I've found, a certain tension (that don't feel good!). So notice if you're feeling judgmental. And get curious about that. That's a good place to start. (Because – and did you know? – it's ALWAYS possible to be curious!)

And how does curiosity feel? The same way awe feels like, I guess. And wonder. And fascination. And having a question that you don't have an answer to (sometimes). Curiosity doesn't come with a 'bad' feeling, judgment usually does.

Judgment goes by the name of FACT, sometimes: This IS going to happen, it WILL be a disaster, I just KNOW. Judgment goes by names like prejudice, discrimination and separation. Or it can pretend to be wisdom. Or evidence. Or certainty. Judgment can often look like the bestest of friends, it can, the one that's got your back – except it isn't, and it doesn't. But understand this: judgment, and curiosity are simply two sides of the same coin. (How curious.) Curiosity is openness, and judgment is the opposite.

Think “Brexit”, or “Donald Trump”, or “Global Warming”, or “Capitalism”, “Communism” or “Socialism”. You COULD be curious about all of the above, with their potential for the catastrophic in your mind's eye. And you could easily be judgmental about what these words stir up in you, too.

Curiosity genuinely doesn't know, it wants to find out more, whilst judgment already knows enough. Curiosity goes by names like listening, appreciation and connection. Yes, curiosity is listening intently, listening deeply, listening beyond the words. Judgment is filling in the gaps, not questioning anything, focusing on the words alone.

Curiosity is the moment without the stories, meanings, or predictions. Curiosity is neutral, judgment is not. Curiosity is the moment without ego. Curiosity is life without measurements, comparisons, and commentary.

## Be Curious, Not Judgmental

Ted Lasso

In one scene from season 1, episode 8, of *Ted Lasso*, Ted (Jason Sudeikis) cites this phrase, “Be curious, not judgmental.” (The story he tells misattributes the words to Walt Whitman; Whitman never said or wrote that, or anything similar.) In the scene, Ted and Rupert (Anthony Head), the vindictive former owner of the football (soccer) club that Ted has been hired to coach, as well as several of the show’s regulars are in a Richmond, England pub. Rupert challenges Ted to a game of darts – and a substantial wager is placed. Rupert, being British, where darts is a prevalent part of the culture, assumes he’ll have the advantage on Ted, the American bumpkin. The game begins, and by the time Ted is down to his final turn of three darts, he has fallen well behind Rupert.

Ted: [*aside to Mae, the pub owner*] Mae, what do I need to win?

Mae: Two triple 20s and a bullseye.

Rupert: [*sniggers*] Good luck.

Ted: [*weighing the first dart, gazing toward the target*] You know, Rupert, guys have underestimated me my entire life. And for years I never understood why. It used to really bother me. But then one day I was driving my little boy to school and I saw this quote by Walt Whitman; it was painted on the wall there. It said “Be curious, not Judgmental.” I like that.

[*Ted throws the first of his three darts. It lands in the triple 20 space. Some cheers from the onlookers*]

Ted: So I get back in my car and I'm driving to work, and all of sudden it hits me. All them fellas who used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. You know, they thought they had everything figured out. So they judged everything. And they judged everyone. And I realized that their underestimating me, who I was had nothing to do with it. Because if they were curious, they would have asked questions. You know. Questions like, have you played a lot of darts, Ted?

[*Ted throws the second dart. It's another triple 20. Amazed cheers from the pub.*]

Ted: Which I would have answered, ‘Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from age 10 to 16, when he passed away.’

[*Ted gazes at the target a moment. He says, “Barbecue sauce” – which had been earlier established as emblematic of the USA, in contrast to tea, emblematic of England – and throws a bullseye. The pub erupts in cheers.*]

To watch the scene: at Youtube, search “Ted Lasso Darts.”



## Spiritual Exercise

To embrace diversity and difference with love, curiosity and respect means learning to be welcoming to a lot of people who are, at first, strangers – perhaps even, to you, quite strange strangers. This month, reflect and journal about your hospitality to the stranger – including hospitality to such strangers as unfamiliar people, ideas, experiences, and parts of yourself that you may have sought to exile. Use these questions as your prompts.

- Warm up by listing some words, phrases, or metaphors that describe some of the strangers – whether human, experiential, or inner – that you have become aware of in your life. Provide four or five words or phrases that complete this sentence: “Strangers in my life recently are...”
- When was the last time you experienced a stranger in your daily work or life? What kind of hospitality was called for from you? How did you do?
- When was the last time you encountered a stranger in the form of an idea, dream, or risk that felt uncomfortable? In what way were you hospitable/inhospitable to this “stranger”?
- Recall a time that a “stranger from within” popped out in an embarrassing overreaction or slip of the tongue? What hospitality could you show to your inner strangers?
- What unwelcome visitors in the form of a grief, depression, or unwelcome development has come into your life recently. What would hospitality to such “visitors” look like? Does it seem like a good idea to be hospitable to these?
- How do you practice hospitality to strangers? To new ideas? To parts of yourself?
- Describe a time when you experienced the joy of solidarity with lots of different kinds of people, such a working together after a disaster.
- To get a sense of an inner stranger, try this. Name three or four people you don’t like and list the reasons you don’t like them. Later, cross out the names of the people and insert your own name. Re-read the list and consider whether you may have stumbled on parts of your inner stranger.



## For Families

Birch Spick, Faith Formation & Congregational Life Coordinator

I loved reading my parents' copies of *National Geographic* as a kid. The natural world has fascinated me ever since my early love of dinosaurs, and I loved reading about it in these magazines. But the older I got and the more I read, the more curious I became about people near and far, and the unique lives they all led. What food do they eat? What clothes do they wear? What do they do for fun? What breaks their hearts? I don't remember focusing much on how we might be alike. The things that make us different and unique were the things that piqued my curiosity. My love of how people can be so different and still grow together is what led me to Unitarian Universalism. Being a people who value pluralism means that we appreciate the many ways that our families, communities, and world are made up of people who are different. We might start appreciating one another's differences by looking for how we are alike. That can help us get to know one another by giving us something familiar to focus on. But how do we learn to appreciate differences for what they truly are? The older I become, the more I realize how important simple curiosity is for valuing difference.

This month, we will read these stories in our Sunday services. Our children will explore them and their lessons more through games and crafts during class. Consider exploring these stories and their lessons at home with these questions.

"The Race to the Top of the Tree" by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer, from *A Lamp In Every Corner*. This is a story about many squirrels taking many paths to the same destination. What can we learn from people who do (or believe) things differently from us?

"Whoever You Are" by Mem Fox. This is a story about finding things we share in common with other people who seem very different from us. How can finding similarities help us appreciate differences?

"A Church for All" by Gayle E. Pitman. This is a story about a church whose members are all different from each other but still share the same community. How do we welcome people who are different from us?

"Odd Velvet" by Mary E. Whitcomb. This is a story about learning to appreciate the things that make people different. What things make you unique? What things make other people in your life unique?

## Check Out

What overall message stands out for you?

## Chalice Extinguishing

Words of Benny Gantz: "We are part of an inspiringly colorful mosaic of cultures and traditions. I will nurture this pluralism."

*Connecting* is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2024 Feb: Equity