Listening To, Learning From Many Voices, A Homily

For
Our Partners in Faith: A Global Worship Service
UUA General Assembly, Portland, OR, Leon Hopper
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When I close my eyes I see through my mind's eye the magnificent and vibrant mosaic of worship and life reflected from our partners in faith around the globe. My view moves from site to site, from village pathways to busy city streets, from sea side to hill side. I close my ears and hear through an inner ear their words, sometimes spoken in my own tongue, but always with accents different from mine. What am I to make of the contrasting images, styles, voices, tongues and accents of our faith? Are the melodies of faith of which they sing engaging counterpoint and contrast to one another or do I also hear elements of dissonance?

In this sacred and hallowed moment I/we would do well to pause to ask: "what is it that we are about in this engaging and exciting venture of global partnership? What is it that we, seek to celebrate as we gather for worship in a global context? Tantalizing as it may be to rest content with such variety there is a need to move beyond the intriguing surface experience to a deeper and inner engagement. What ideas, concepts can we find to enable us to reach even deeper understandings and stronger relationships? How do we, folk from differing cultures, evolve a greater sense of mutuality and commonality? To suggest a direction for our answers to these questions I offer the evocative words of a beloved Unitarian Universalist minister and a Jewish Rabbi:

First from the Rabbi

In the preface to his book on "how to avoid the clash of civilizations" Jonathan Sacks, chief Rabbi, Great Britain writes --

"I see in the rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilizations clashes and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long, the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God …. In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened by difference."*

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Words flow into language and language is used to advocate, instruct and inform.

Language communicates if a listener cultivates the "art of listening."

In a brief meditation Unitarian minister, Jacob Trapp, reminds us that:

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If it is language that makes us human,
one half of language is to listen.

Silence can exist without speech,
but speech cannot live without silence.

To learn the true power of words
is to learn also the power of silence.

Listen to the speech of others.
Listen even more to their silence.

To listen to another person
is to take seriously their otherness.

I believe that this is what Rabbi Sacks invites us to do, to honor the dignity of their difference. But one might well ask "by what route?" To suggest an answer I want to describe one way that has come to my attention:

Invariably upon returning from a visit to one our faith partners in Hungary, or Romania, the Czech Republic, the Philippines or the Khasi Hills in India, I soon will be asked "how was your trip?" which will be followed by "how are they different from us?" Upon hearing the question I am reminded of a typical response to a question "what do Unitarians or Universalists believe?" Too often the response is a litany of what one does not believe using the definitions of "traditional religion" as the benchmark or standard for the understanding of faith and religion. Is this how we are to understand an others faith and to find a grounding for mutuality? I am forced to wonder: how it can be that by starting out with contrast we will come to celebrate the wholeness of our vision along with the distinctiveness of our cultures and historical traditions? It seems to me that when we ask or seek for difference we inadvertently create an "us" and a "them" rather than the "we" that we seek to achieve.

I would dare to suggest that in listening to both words and silences we can begin to hear with an inner ear – thereby to sensitively pick up the cadence of the others voices, to perceive their thoughts, ideas and convictions daring, to go deeper than outward meaning and the bindings of our own cultural experience and understanding. What is called for in this sort of listing is not for differences, or similarities, but rather the depth of meaning of the others idiom, history, culture, style, language -- how difficult! I believe that this is what Jonathan Sacks calls for when he asks for an affirmation of the dignity of difference.

This is the challenge to listen not only with our ears and mind but more importantly our hearts, and there by to go as deep as possible into the spirit/soul

of the other. And thereby, as much as it is possible, move into the culture of the other.

What have I learned?

First and foremost is that I must cultivate the practice of **patience.** Patience exacts a discipline of quiet listening for the cadence and accents of a culture and history other than my own. Patience calls upon me to refrain from making assumptions grounded in my own experience and thereby to open the way to deeper understanding. From a practice of patience there will emerge an awareness and sense of an **appreciation** of the faith and practices of the other. Through careful listening I will soon discern the **longings** and hopes imbedded in the worship and lives of my faith brothers and sisters of other lands. I will also sense the profound elements of **struggle** present in their lives, and thereby revealing in time the qualities of **perseverance** and **tenacity** evident in their experiences. From this listening and learning will evolve a sense of deep and abiding **caring** and **connection**.

From a source long lost I recall a poem that aptly expresses this message of connections:

We're connected through love,
we're connected through life.

We're connected through stories
and tears in the night,
We're connected through memories
connected through friends.

Feel deep the connections made strong again.

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To move into a global community exacts intimate relationships with deep understanding, patience, appreciation and humility. May this be our aspiration.

So be it. Amen.

* The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations by Joseph Sacks, Continuum, 2004 p.vii