

“Identity”
by
The Reverend Bill Clark

First Reading: Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries.

Second Reading: It's Not Easy Being' Green

“Identity”
A Sermon by
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It was exactly a year and a month from my mother's death. It was not timed that way – intentionally – it just happened that way. I quit my job – left my career – sold my lease – packed up all my cares and woes – and left the country. I travelled from L.A. to the Tahitian, Cook, and Fiji Islands, New Zealand, Australia and up to Asia. It was a dream trip. It took three years. Why it took almost a year (10months) to get to Australia. I like travelling slow.

You think you are doing something so original and unique until you meet so many travelers on the same Islands doing the exact same thing. I mean here I am in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on some Fijian Island somewhere in a grass hut, drinking kava root and shouting Bula-Bula. I mean I was far far

from home – feeling like I am in some national Geographic Magazine – somewhere – and here are two other American travelers doing that exact same thing – only going in the opposite direction.

And here I thought I was so special!!

So one evening we start talking. They are on a world wind six-week tour and heading home. They got as far as Thailand – in six weeks and now heading home. I told them I had left eight months ago and just made it to Fiji. People travel differently.

So we are sitting together and one of the first question she asked me is;

“What do you do?”

“Do?” Looking around and gesturing, I respond. “This. I do this.”

“No, no, she says, shaking her head. “I mean what do you do for work?”

“This. I travel now. I don’t work.”

I am kind of toying with her now. A bit unclear of why she is asking me these questions – out here in the middle of my very own National Geographic Magazine!

“Well,” she finally asked, “what do you do when you are not travelling?”

“My last job was working with deaf children.”

“Oh, you work with deaf children, how great..... I love sign language. It is so beautiful. I had a cousinAnd off she went.....

She finally got what she was looking for. Some container or category she could place me into. I had a label. I had an identity. I was a teacher of deaf children.

Now I don't mean to judge this one American Woman or pick on her alone. But this happened again and again in my three years of travelling. Perhaps it has happened to you.

People often place our work or profession as central to our identity. Or who we are is simply defined by what we do – for work? This then begs the question; what if you don't work? What if you are retired? Or don't have to work? Or what if you can't work?

If you do work or have a profession is that really all you are – a teacher – a butcher a baker a candle stick maker; a - musician – minister – contractor – builder – busboy?

Is that all there is to our identity? Is that all there is?

(music: Is That All there is)

And sometimes it is. Sometimes what we do professionally becomes central to who we are because we do it so well. We receive some notoriety, power and popularity – a reputation or respect because we do our “work” so well.

I know in my first profession, as a teacher of deaf children I worked with this family as a private live-in teacher/nanny with two deaf children; Vahakn and Sevan, I loved being identified as their teacher. (tell stories of interpreting with Diane Keaton, telling Andy Warhol or Julian Schnabel no I cannot stop teaching Vahakn and just let be “an artist.” The point being that I loved this identity because it fed my self esteem and made me feel good about what I was doing in the world.

I found this similar situation when I went into the ministry. I loved being a parish minister. I felt I was contributing to the world in a very positive way. Then suddenly I had to stop parish ministry because of my health. So if I am not a minister – now – then who am I? It’s kind of a mid-life identity crisis. I know it will pass. It’s interesting to observe it – to see where it takes me. At least I hopefully, will get at least this one good sermon out of it.

What about some of you? I know we have many members and visitors here at the Meeting House who are in transition around work. Was that identity transition toward retirement an easy one for you? (*I see some people shaking their heads yes, while their spouses are shaking and saying no.*)

Or what about those who are still working. Is your profession/vocation your only identity?

I think my struggle with all this lead me to the realization that our professions or work is merely a part of our identity. Although I do think in our culture our profession becomes central to our identity.

Identity for me, however, is something that is at the very core of who we are and how we interact in the world. It is not something we can necessarily change.

The reading this morning from Deaf in America illustrates this point beautifully. How many of us would use the word “hearing” to identify ourselves? We would probably not consider this as we live in a hearing world. Yet to be outside of that culture, the predominant culture, this identity becomes imperative to ones sense of self and survival.

It is like our second reading stated; It is not easy bein’ green! But I think it will do fine...it is beautiful. And I think it is what I want to be. It is not easy being deaf, but it will do fine. It, too, is beautiful! It is not easy being outside of the predominant culture, but it’ll do fine, they all are beautiful. It is not easy being gay, it is not easy being latino, especially if you live in

Arizona!! It is not easy being disabled, it is not easy being a person of color, but it is who we are meant to be.

I recall about 15 years ago I was the worship coordinator for the UU meeting House in Provincetown. I had arranged for a gay deaf poet, Clayton Valli to come and give a sermon to the congregation. On the wayside pulpit outside it listed the guest speaker as Clayton Valli; gay – deaf poet. When Clayton arrived he asked that we change the order; Clayton identified himself as a Deaf- Gay – Man!! Being deaf was his predominate identity. It was how he interacted in the world and the world with him. Being gay, for Clayton was his second identity and a poet, his third.

So in this world of grand and wondrous diversity, how do you identify yourself? If you had to choose three words to identify yourself, what three words would you choose? And I do not mean words like friendly, or nice, or bald, rather if you had to choose three, and only three identities that best explain who you are (at the very core of your being) what would they be?

This question was put to a group of teenagers I worked with while a minister in Texas. It was part of the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference

workshop that included members of our UU teen group, teen groups from the local synagogue and a group from the local African-American church.

It was fascinating to observe how these young people chose to identify themselves. All of the members of the synagogue listed their first identity as Jewish. The African-American teens had their race listed as their first identity. Only a few of the UU teens identified themselves as Unitarian Universalist. With all of the teenagers their second and third identities were related to their in or afterschool activities; such as sports, musical interest, choirs, chorus etc.

What the youth then were asked to do was sculpt these three identities out of what I used to call good ole fashion pipe cleaners. – but now are called – get this chenille strips. How the times they are a changin'. So I am going to ask that you think of the three words; words that you feel identify yourself best.

Let me show you my example. And remember artistic experience does not matter here. (show your example) and then you all will have a chance to participate in this activity.

First I am a man – and I chose a white strip because after all I am a white man. This will not change for me. As I go out into the world this identity is

what people see first. Being a white male I am accorded certain privileges. I did not ask for them. They were simply granted to me (at least in our culture). My maleness is central to who I am and how people view me.

The next identity I chose is represented by a pink triangle – for I am a gay man. This is an identity I struggled with in my youth – denying it at all costs. Yet now I honor this identity as central to the core of who I am and how I interact in the world and also, how the world – fortunately or unfortunately interacts with me. People across this country will discriminate against me, some can actually hate me, simply for being a gay man. Ordinary people, Senators, Congressmen and women debate my rights to marry, to serve our country. Some states blatantly deny me my rights. The harder you try to deny people their rights and oppress them – the stronger that identity becomes – because after all no one is truly free when others are oppressed.

And the third identity is represented by a chalice. I am a Unitarian Universalist. This identity permits me to interact with people from a liberal religious perspective. It helps set my moral compass. It gives me guidance and a way to articulate my view of human nature, god, evil, salvation and grace. My identity as a UU allows me to live a life – live – live this life –

not of creeds – but of deeds. As Thomas Jefferson stated; “It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read.”

So now I invite you to take some of “chenille strips” in the pews and sculpt your three identities. You will have about five minutes and then I invite you to share these in your groups. At the end of the allotted time I would ask that one person from each group be willing to share some of the groups observations from this activity. This is not a time to comment one another’s, but rather to listen and learn about the diversity amidst our unity as Unitarian Universalist.

ACTIVITY AND SHARING

The point of this activity, clearly is to demonstrate the incredible diversity among human beings. And yet in the midst of the wonderful landscape of diversity there is a cherished unity.

It is like what UU minister, Richard Gilbert wrote “We are all more human than otherwise. The human race is a vast rainbow, white, black, red, yellow and brown bursting into view – yet for all – blood is red, the sky is blue, the earth brown, the night dark.

Boundaries divide us, lines drawn to mark our diversity, maps charted to separate the human race from itself.

Strength and weakness, arrogance and humility – confidence and fear live together in each one,

Reminding us that we share a common humanity.

We are all more human than otherwise.

My friends, no matter what your identity – man, woman, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and everything in between – Muslim, Jewish, Trinitarian – Unitarian – atheist – agnostic – teacher – preacher – immigrant – or natural born citizen – let us as liberal religious people – celebrate our differences rather than discriminate – honor the vast diverse landscape rather than hate it – because then - maybe just possibly *then* – a true sense of universal love will permeate our world – and peace – a true and everlasting peace on this earth will prevail. Imagine all the people living life in peace.

May it be so. Amen.

Benediction:

Yes, my friends may we work toward a planet transformed by our care,

Holding up our varied identities

And celebrating the unity within our vast array of diversity

We are gay and straight, black and white, old and young and rich and poor.

Still we are all more human than otherwise.

May we take the time to look up into brother's faces and into our sister's eyes and see there

The reflection of our own eyes. Human eyes. Human beings.

Learning to live together in peace.

Postlude

