Call to Worship

"That Which Holds All" by the late Nancy Shaffer:

Because she wanted everyone to feel included
in her prayer,
she said right at the beginning
several names for the Holy:
Spirit, she said, Holy One, Mystery, God.

But then thinking these weren't enough ways of addressing
that which cannot fully be addressed, she added
particularities, saying,

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love,
Ancient Holy One, Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know,
Gracious God, and also Spirit of this Earth,
God of Sarah, Gaia, Thou.

And then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming
superlatives as well: Most Creative One,
Greatest Source, Closest Hope –
even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her
probably redundant, but then she couldn't stop:

One who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew
technically a number of those present didn't believe
the stars had been made by anyone or thing
but just luckily happened.
One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion,
she said, and no one laughed.
That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning,
she said, and the room was silent.

Then, although she hadn't imagined it this way,
others began to offer names.
Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another.

Ancestor, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back.
Refuge.
That Which Holds All.
A child said, Water.
Someone said, Kuan Yin.

Then: Womb.
Witness.
Great Kindness.
Great Eagle.
Eternal Stillness.

And then, there wasn't any need to say the things
she'd thought would be important to say,
and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

Amen.

Readings

A Conversation Amongst the Flowers by Rev. Kate Wilkinson

One day two little girls stood side by side looking at the garden, which was in full bloom.
"Isn't it pretty?" said the first little girl, "with all the different colors?"
"I don't see color," said the second little girl, for this is what her parents had taught her to say.
This started up quite a conversation amongst the flowers, who spoke their own quiet language to each other.
"That makes me want to cry," said the bleeding heart, who was full of feeling on the best of days.
"You always want to cry," said the iris, who was always self-possessed, never shedding petals here and there like the apple blossoms which grew above her.
"But it's so sad," the bleeding heart repeated. "Not to see color."
"Don't worry," said the flag, upright and direct as always. "They're just pretending anyway, when they say that."
"But why would they pretend such a thing?" asked the peony, indignantly. "It would be such a shame, not to see my beautiful magenta layers." Of all the flowers in the garden, she was the most showy.

“Because they were taught the wrong thing about this country, when they got here,” said the flag, who often spoke about the country’s founding. “They were told this place was a melting pot. That everyone should become the same.”
The sweetgrass, who had been here long before, swayed gently in the breeze and added, “They didn’t understand that this land is a garden. That we each add beauty with our different colors and shapes and sizes.”
“Well, I certainly do,” said the peony, ever confident.
“They forget,” said the lupine, “that we bloom in our own way and in different seasons to make the world more beautiful.”
“But will they remember?” asked the nervous forget-me-not, always preoccupied with the questions of legacy.
“That’s why we’re here,” remarked the daisy, who, though humble, knew the power of a simple gesture, having once been placed into the barrel of a gun to proclaim peace. “That’s why we’re here. To remind them.”

Excerpted from the 2013 *Ware Lecture* by Eboo Patel: “Standing Your Sacred Ground”

You have what I call a theology of interfaith collaboration at your fingertips. For those of you who tend towards the humanist dimension of the UU fellowship, the term ethic of interfaith cooperation might feel more comfortable. Bottom line, the resources for cooperation with people who are different lie at the center of the thought and practice of the UU movement.

Knowing and being able to speak clearly and proudly, this theology, or ethic of interfaith cooperation, to call up your own stories, practices, quotations in a range of situations, is absolutely core to effective interfaith leadership. So [is] having an appreciative knowledge of other traditions. The UU movement takes both of these responsibilities seriously.

When you express this theology of interfaith cooperation, you give many gifts. The first is to share your own light. The second is to strengthen interfaith solidarity. The third, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, is to help strengthen the convictions of those with whom you speak.

Sermon - In Praise of Our Differences, Rev. Melissa Carvill Ziemer
I offer this manuscript with the acknowledgment that a sermon is an aural/oral event. This manuscripts reflects my preparation and is not a transcript of the actual sermon.

I am honored to be here today. Talk about that.

I'm also grateful for the invitation to reflect and speak on the value of pluralism, which is being considered as one of the value statements to update the language of Article 2 in our UUA Bylaws. Pluralism, like the other value statements, is an articulation of what it means for Unitarian Universalists to live our lives with love at the center. So let's dive in and start with first things first.

What is pluralism? Dr. Diana Eck is the founder and director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. She has been studying, teaching and promoting pluralism for many years. When she speaks about pluralism she is careful to say that diversity and pluralism are not the same thing, for this is a common misperception. Diversity, she explains, is a fact of our society. Pluralism is our response to diversity; our engagement with diversity, which cannot be satisfied by mere tolerance. Pluralism calls for more; it calls for active encounter. But not, she cautions, not the lowest common denominator sort of encounter in which we connect around only what we share and where we agree. She goes on to explain that pluralism requires encounter and conversation and efforts to connect even across our deepest differences. Which means that pluralism often involves disagreement and dissension. The key to pluralism is that the engagement is honest and mutual. It can include critiques of another's views but, because it requires seeking understanding, it also leads us to deeper interrogation of our own views, which can actually lead to deeper understanding of ourselves and our convictions as well as deeper understanding and respect for the convictions of others.

This really resonates with what Eboo Patel had to say to us when he spoke to our UU General Assembly in 2013 about our interfaith leadership. In his lecture he spoke generously about the way Unitarian Universalists show up with interfaith partners in a whole host of educational, cultural and movement spaces. We heard about how Rev. Karen is doing that yesterday in the remarks from the Lead Minister of the UCC church across the way, the Rev. Elissa Johnk, who spoke about how Rev. Karen has helped reinvigorate the local Interfaith Alliance. I learned from your congregation's website that you are deeply connected to interfaith engagement work locally. I love that you are deeply connected to Vermont Interfaith Action on a host of critical justice initiatives and that you cultivate the virtue of interfaith understanding and engagement with your young people through the Crossing Paths curriculum you offer so your kids can learn about their neighbors of other faiths. That is all wonderful and just what I expect from Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Overall, I think we are really good at showing up for respectful encounters with other faith communities to learn about one another and build respectful relationships across our differences.

And we often excel at working with other faith communities in common cause. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago our UUA President Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt and the UCC President Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson met together for a public dialogue which included robust reflections on the interfaith cooperation between our two faith communities for racial justice, immigration justice, climate justice, economic justice, LGBTQI+ justice and so many more concerns which both of our traditions call us to act together on for a more just and loving world.

These ways of being were planted in me when I was a member of UU congregations as a young adult. One of my first and most impactful leadership roles was as the co-convener of my congregation's participation in the Interfaith Emergency Winter Shelter program. And in theological school I had tremendously rich experiences learning from, with, and about people of many faiths. One of the most impactful experiences I had in school was the chance to learn deeply about devotional rituals in the Theravada Buddhist tradition in relationship with leaders of What Dhammaram, which was the first Theravada Buddhist temple in the Midwest, founded by a community of Thai immigrants living in Chicago.

All of these experiences meant that I was eager to engage in the interfaith community in my new ministry when I was first called to the congregation in Kent, OH. I had a lovely lunch with the minister at the progressive Disciples of Christ congregation upon my arrival and she invited me to join the next meeting of the Kent Ministerial Association.

I then told a story about being disinvited, their reasoning, my suspicions, and how they eventually disbanded when the new, gay UCC pastor tried to join. I spoke about how I felt and then about how a group of us formed a new interfaith council. I explained how we started with Bible study and then eventually grew to become involved in local racial justice efforts and then later still in an initiative called Teatime for Peace with Muslims in a neighboring town. Sounds like a happy ending. And in many ways it was. That organization we founded, the Kent Interfaith Alliance for Reconciliation and Justice, is still ongoing there.

The first chapter of my experience in Kent was no engagement. The second chapter was rich and rewarding engagement. But, it was in the third chapter of interfaith relationships with much more conservative Muslim leaders that I first really began to experience the challenges of that work. I enjoyed connecting with the young adult women involved with Teatime for Peace, but connecting with the older, male leaders in charge of the mosque was more challenging. It was hard for me not to take their conservative views on gender and sexuality personally and it was hard for them to accept me as a religious leader. The experience was surface level cooperative and polite, but there wasn't real engagement there. I knew the orientation of that particular mosque wasn't reflective of all Muslim communities in the US and I decided to be curious about what I was experiencing and told myself I wanted to learn more about the diverse expressions of Islam in the US.

About a year and a half later, I was preparing to take up my new role with the UUMA and move back to MA. It just so happened that a chance for me to learn and grow was right around the corner. Through an unexpected series of events I was invited to speak on a panel shortly after I arrived in my new town which led me to meet Mehlaqa Samdani and eventually receive an invitation to join the board of her organization, Critical Connections, which promotes understanding of the social, religious and political trends involving Muslim communities in Western Mass and beyond. Through that work I had the opportunity to meet and learn from Muslims who hold a wide range of orientations to their faith and practice and I am grateful for the ways I've grown in my own capacity to really understand through relationship that there are just as many complexities, contradictions and diversities within Muslim communities as there are in any of our faith communities. To be blunt, greater exposure and knowledge has made me both more informed and less judgmental. Interfaith engagement has helped me grow as a person and I think that is true for most of us who have the opportunity to build bridges across difference.

There is so much to be gained from this kind of relationship building with our neighbors. Is this resonating with you? I tell you these stories about my own organizational and personal experiences with pluralism because now I want to share with you some of what I think we as Unitarian Universalists still need to work on in our faith communities and in our individual lives. I've noticed that in many of our congregations we are really great at connecting with our neighbors of other faiths in the public square, but struggle more to connect with our neighbors who hold spiritual or theological orientations that don't resonate with us in our own congregations. Maybe this doesn't happen here, but I know it happens in many places that some UUs choose not to participate in worship when they know there will be spiritual or theological orientations shared that don't resonate with them personally. And if they happen to come to worship not knowing what the service will be about and find theologies or language that they personally reject, it isn't unheard of in some places for some people to simply leave the service and wait for coffee hour to start.

This kind of approach to worship is a challenge not only for our congregations but also for our own personal spiritual growth. Unitarian Universalism is a pluralistic religious tradition. Among our community are people with a wide range of spiritual inheritances, curiosities and theological orientations. The job of the ministers and religious professionals in our faith is to support all members and friends in growing their souls and that means we need to speak in many faith languages in our common worship. Our worship services, over time, ought draw on a wide range of sources, secular and sacred, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Unitarian Universalist, pagan and more. By practicing pluralism in our worship, we ensure that all those who participate in worship will sometimes hear words and songs and scriptures and experience rituals that most deeply nurture their spirit. Which means, of course, that sometimes in our worship we will hear words and songs and scriptures and experience rituals that do not resonate with us. When that

happens to you, I want to encourage you to give thanks. Instead of focusing on the dissonance between your own spiritual language and the language of the worship service you are encountering, I encourage you to focus on the beauty and power of being part of a faith community that values and practices pluralism. What does not resonate with you is very likely nurturing the spirit of someone else in the room and that is a reason for gratitude. It means there is something in our worship for people with many diverse ways of understanding and experiencing the Holy and it means there is room for you and your beloveds should your own experience change you in ways you did not expect.

Not only that, the practice of pluralism in our worship and in our congregations is practice we can take home to strengthen our families. In one of her lectures entitled “The Pluralism Within”, Dr. Diana Eck notes that many of us find we have to practice pluralism in our very selves if we find ourselves drawn to grow in more than one faith tradition. And even if that is not the case for us personally, it is almost certainly true we must practice pluralism if we want to retain deep bonds in our families and in our circles of friends and coworkers and neighbors. How many of you have a loved one who holds a faith tradition that is different from yours? Almost everyone? In our world and especially here in our multicultural, multiracial, multi religious nation, pluralism is a critical skill for building and maintaining relationships across difference.

The thing I most want to say is that the practice of pluralism calls us not to avoid difference and not even to tolerate difference, but to welcome difference. The practice of pluralism calls us to engage with one another in building bridges between our divisions without trying to cover them up or boil them down to one common denominator. To mix my metaphors, I might say the goal is not to find the golden rule to which we all ascribe, but rather to find the vibrant, colorful strands of our differences and hold them together in tension. When we do, we honor one another as sacred beings with inherent worthiness, even when we cannot agree with one another’s spiritual worldview, theological orientation or value commitments.

We heard in Kate Wilkinson’s lovely poem about the conversation among the flowers affirming all of their places in the garden. As Unitarian Universalists, our values call us to affirm the worthiness of each individual born into this world. Our values call us to center Love in practice which requires understanding and honoring that there are countless ways to be human in this world. Pluralism calls us to be curious about our differences and to remember that each soul contains within it a spark of the divine which may well be expressed or articulated in ways that we simply do not understand. The practice of pluralism graces us with growing understanding, wider horizons and stronger senses of solidarity. To receive these graces, we have to practice. And when we do, Eboo Patel reminds us, the gifts will extend beyond ourselves to those others with whom we connect. It is so often true in life that when we share our worldview with another, it helps them reflect upon and clarify their own.

The renowned Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that congregations are laboratories for practice. I encourage you to take that to heart. Let your worship and faith formation and social connections in this place be a place where you deepen your practice of the value and ethic of pluralism. As a pluralistic faith, it is an incredibly rich place to practice. And the amazing thing about your practice is that not only will it benefit you, it will also benefit your family and your friends, your congregation and your community. Whenever and wherever you practice pluralism, your practice is a blessing to the world.

Benediction, his Holiness the Daila Lama
"Make the vow today that you shall never allow your faith to be used as an instrument of violence. Make the vow today that you may become an instrument of peace, living according to the ethical teachings of compassion in your own religion."

Works Consulted

Dr. Diana Eck - *The Gifford Lectures* at the University of Edinburgh, especially “The Pluralism Within” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ricoa4NSrY

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University https://pluralism.org/

Eboo Patel - The 2013 UUA Ware Lecture, “Standing Your Sacred Ground”
https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2013/workshops/eboo-patel

Eboo Patel - On the Talk of the Nation, “On the Importance of Religious Pluralism”
https://www.npr.org/transcripts/95286690

Eboo Patel
https://www.npr.org/2008/10/02/95286690/eboo-patel-on-the-importance-of-religious-pluralism?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3nKW_0LoMvChP0jb9kRqfmg0DEtWiEmeooPsNCJBPjCZH7yWmS5j3X63s_aem_AU5HL8YU8QgwKf4zlnLmt96K3XMGgHtcjy_jbuBehkqdvEPpgCv4TiaKlH3X_uRwwXzzTce6n-YIBi-cLg_aq3Db

Diana Eck
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ricoa4NSrY

https://www.uua.org/worship/words/time-all-ages/handy-guide-uu-values

https://pluralism.org/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR1OSaCz_ZVKzdcqdjOsZ-xyAJ2rETTd5llnYPTWNsL2IeI0llntqxSipiY_aem_AU6ax_ejV8broGN_D-kgkyJgCDXz_tkk8L16lztECGABwyhr4n-30U9JsjwLIXL75u_jB-0fE4t53McC_X3P-EV1

https://www.uuworld.org/articles/need-language-reverence?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR2T6voSqMonICvcf_PAb8ULnjAyd48e8wHIi-Jy3hbHL-INxl8PW9GQO-Y_aem_AU4hRiPBx2W_oewJyyO6OsnHVydAf3ep5DtTdzS5YGEdt5EXbGN_Lul4SiYE-saaVD3GvNeCnGbPYH7YQ-PTeL4R

https://assets.website-files.com/645d653e85543c6b347dae45/64cd04837fd494efaab8c7dc_IDI%20Intercultural%20Development%20Plan%20Example.pdf

In Praise of Our Differences

It is important for our Unitarian Universalist congregations to discern what we hold in common and find ways to live our values in the world. Pluralism is one of the values our Article II Study Commission has proposed for our collective consideration. Let's explore how an enthusiastic embrace of our differences might help us grow our souls and bless the world, individually and together.

Rev. Melissa Carvill Ziemer is the Director of Ministries and Programs for the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and the Minister Affiliated with First Parish, in Northfield, MA, a small, rural, lay-led congregation. Before the UUMA, Melissa served more than a decade as the parish minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kent, in Kent, OH. She is married to Rev. Evin Carvill Ziemer

(who is the UUA's New England Regional Developmental Lead). They live in Easthampton, MA with their two school age children and their teen aged nephew.