

Making a World of Difference
Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker
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Thoughts to ponder at the beginning:

In a politically diverse nation, only by finding that common ground
can we achieve results for the common good.

– Olympia Snowe

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Conservatives and liberals can find common ground.

– Jesse Jackson

Story

In 1893, Chicago hosted a world's fair. Chicago was known for its muck and grime, crudeness and crime. Only 22 years earlier, the great Chicago fire destroyed over 3 square miles, killed 300 people, and left 100,000 people homeless. In the early 1890s, Chicago was a center for slaughtering meat, and the attendant smells associated with that industry covered the city like a blanket. But Chicago felt it was a city on the move, and capturing the privilege of hosting the world fair was considered a great feather in the city's cap.

We still find in our world today, some of the “firsts” offered at that fair: Ferris wheel rides – the Ferris wheel having been created especially for the fair, Juicy Fruit gum and Cracker Jacks. Shredded Wheat. Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.

The World's Fair also inspired another first: an unprecedented gathering of leaders from religious traditions all over the world – the first ever World Parliament of Religions. The Parliament was organized in part by Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Jones held a conviction that there was an underlying unity among all religions. Trusting in his vision, he rented a hall on the south side of Chicago where he shared his dream: "With your

help and cooperation, we will start here a new church, to be the Church of All Souls." Jones' son Richard continued the legacy by founding All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, currently the largest UU congregation in the United States.

The Chicago Church of All Souls provided social services to the surrounding community. Jones also developed interfaith relationships with other local, liberal religious leaders to assist in this work. When the World's Fair was held in Chicago in 1893, Jones saw the opportunity to convene a parallel event with religious leaders from all over the world – the World's Parliament of Religion.

A spirit of novelty and curiosity infused the event. Most American Protestants had never before encountered non-Christian religions, so the pageantry of the waving national flags and the stunning appearance of many of the participants was a sensation. An official history showed over a hundred photographs of places of worship in unfamiliar lands far from the United States and costumes exotic—to Americans, such as "the eloquent monk Vivekananda of Bombay, clad in gorgeous red apparel, his bronzed face surmounted with a huge turban of yellow."

With his characteristic confidence, Jones described the event in his own book, *A Chorus of Faith*: "It was plain to see that the priests and preachers on the platform of Columbus Hall were having an exceedingly good time. The soul had escaped its conventional fetters, laid aside its ecclesiastical trumpery and had gone out to play in the open fields of God. The spirits of men and women were out walking on the hilltops of human nature. They were having a good time because they had all escaped barriers and fetters peculiar to them... The Parliament, if it has proved nothing else, has proved what a splendid thing human nature is to build a religious fellowship upon."

Representatives explained their own religious beliefs and discussed topics of social concern. The first ordained Universalist woman minister, Olympia Brown, spoke on "Crime and its Remedy." A diverse panel representing Eastern religions discussed "How

Can the Methods of Christian Missionaries Be Improved?" At the conclusion of the Parliament, Charles Bonney, President of the Columbian Exposition, proclaimed, *"From now on, the great religions of the world will make war no longer on each other, and instead on the giant ills that afflict humankind."*

Though Jones believed in a unity among religions, the Parliament's success did not depend on participants sharing that belief. Instead it rested on members of diverse traditions knowing their differences, but still committing to work together. That incredible vision, that people of different beliefs, practices, and perspectives could come together to solve the ills of the world, underlies interfaith work today.

A reconvened Parliament of the World's Religions began to meet, at its one hundred year anniversary. Since then, a Parliament of the World's Religions has been held roughly every five years. At the 2009 Parliament in Australia, over 6,000 people shared the vision of interfaith cooperation, including a panel of Unitarian Universalists who shared stories affirming our seventh Principle, "The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

In 1893 as now, Unitarian Universalists have seen the promise of interfaith collaboration. Following the vision of Jenkin Lloyd Jones and so many others, I will be attending the World Parliament of Religions in October in Salt Lake City. The theme of this upcoming Parliament is compassion – a value held deep at the heart of all the great faiths of the world.

(<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/chorus/workshop1/173559.shtml> and Erik Larsen *Devil in the White City*)

I want to begin by asking you to imagine you are planning a dinner party for the most special people in your life. Imagine the table, how you will set it and what you will serve. Spend a few moments thinking about whom you will invite, who your most treasured people are. Call them to your mind's eye. Hold them in your awareness for a few moments. We'll move on for now, but we will return to our dinner parties shortly.

I met Pastor Jimmy about three weeks ago in Indiana. We were there visiting our son, and we had elected to stay at a B&B we had never stayed at before. So there, on Sunday morning, at the breakfast table, Pastor Jimmy and his wife Sue sat down with us. I don't remember just how he "outed" himself as a minister, but early in the conversation it became clear he was one. I remained quiet, because I was on vacation, and sometimes, well, I don't want to talk about church all that much when I am resting from my work therein.

Pastor Jimmy was from "way west Texas," a very conservative area by his own report.

"What denomination is the church you serve?" I asked.

"Southern Baptist," he said, then hedged and said, "Well, sort of. We don't agree with them on everything, so we've really split off from them in a way."

I was curious about that, but I never pursued that line of questioning because my curiosity about another topic was in the ascendancy. I asked Pastor Jimmy how his church was reacting to the recent Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality. I figured we could all find something to say about that.

"Well, we won't marry same-sex couples," he said. "Theologically we believe homosexuality is a sin according to the Bible. But we welcome everyone into our

church. We believe everyone has their sin.”

He didn't elaborate on just how his church would welcome the LGBTQ community. My guess is that LGBTQ folks would feel uncomfortable there. But, at least in Pastor Jimmy's mind, all were welcome.

The woman who ran the B&B with her husband entered the conversation at this point saying that where the Supreme Court ruling touched her was in remedying the legal situations gay and lesbian couples had encountered where it came to life-and-death decisions or inheritance. She said, “It makes sense to me that a partner should be able to make medical decisions in the event that the other partner is unable to do so.”

Pastor Jimmy nodded and said, “I agree. Legally the ruling makes sense to me.”

“You know,” he added, “This is a very personal issue for me. My brother was gay. And when he was dying, his partner couldn't make medical decisions for him. We had to do that. So we set it up so that his partner Brian made the decisions, communicated the decisions to us, and then we told the doctors what to do.”

He said, “My parents weren't too happy about that, but I told them that was the way it had to be. Brian had to make the decisions. Not us.”

I shared that the issue was personal for me, too – that my aunt Ruth had been a lesbian, that she and her partner Florence were together for more than 50 years before Florence died, and that Ruth had been a high school guidance counselor, a profession that required that she remain securely closeted lest she lose her job. “If they were alive today, they would be able to marry,” I said.

Pastor Jimmy's wife, Sue, replied. “There are a lot of straight marriages that don't last nearly as long as that. The Supreme Court made the right decision.”

The conversation so far was fascinating and odd: Fascinating because, despite the fact I travel in religious circles, I seldom have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with a religious conservative like Jimmy. Here in Brunswick, there are two clergy groups – the liberal group and the conservative group – and they don't mix. I wish it were otherwise, but it isn't. When I started serving this church, I invited every church in town to my installation – but the only ones who sent representatives were liberal. The others stayed away, and I have never been invited to an event at any of their churches. The clergy groups reflect the rest of life, it seems to me, where people organize themselves into groups that match their own characteristics: whether political, religious, socioeconomic, racial, age – or other characteristics.

Think for a minute about the dinner party I asked you to imagine earlier. How similar are your guests to you? Financially? In sexual orientation? Politically? Racially? The answers will vary among each of us, individually, but my guess is many of us would have imagined a dinner party of similar people.

I was grateful to have met Pastor Jimmy and to have had him share with such candor. The conversation was also fascinating because it fit into very few of my preconceived notions of what a pastor from a church like Jimmy's might say. I expected him to draw the line more tightly, more angrily, more militantly. I expected him to be angry at his brother and unwelcoming of his brother's partner. Above all, I expected him to say the Supreme Court's ruling was just plain wrong.

The conversation was odd, because here were a bunch of straight folks discussing the ruling, with no one to represent the constituency most affected by the ruling. Most particularly the conversation was odd because Pastor Jimmy did not know I was also a minister. I started to feel badly and uncomfortable about that. Here I was making Pastor Jimmy do all the work, asking him to reveal where he stood while I sat back. I was making him do all the work, in other words. Moments later, he and his wife stood to

leave the table, go collect their golf clubs, and head out for a game, saying, “It feels strange to be playing golf on Sunday. Usually I’m leading a church service at this point,”

That was my big opening. I said, “I know what you mean. I am a minister, too, and I’m having the same feeling right now.”

“Really?” he said. “What denomination?”

“Unitarian Universalist,” I answered, “We have a different theological approach to this issue. We can talk about that tomorrow morning, if you want to.”

The next morning, Pastor Jimmy and Sue joined us again, but this time the conversation veered in whole new directions. Among other things, Pastor Jimmy spoke about the work his church does to make sure hungry children in his community have enough to eat. Collaborating with the other churches in town, they make bagged lunches for children to bring home over the week-end. They deliver the lunches to the school. During recess, when the children are out of the room, the teachers deposit the food into the appropriate backpacks, sparing the needy children any shame over receiving aid. He spoke also about the Gulf of Mexico, the increasing pollution, and the loss of beaches where he used to swim as a child.

I told him about some of the work I have done with Joanna Macy, and some of the worship services about earth care I have led. At the end of our conversation, I said, “I think a lot of the time, the things that unite us are much greater than the things that divide us.” He agreed.

I continued: “The press loves controversies, so we keep hearing about all the areas where we disagree, as though we are always completely polarized. And I don’t think it’s true we are always completely polarized.”

As I spoke I harkened back to my ordination, when one of the ministers of my childhood, the Rev. John Nichols gave these words of welcome:

“When a congregation launches a woman or a man into the Unitarian Universalist ministry, it casts a vote of confidence: confidence in the future of religious freedom over all forms of tyranny; confidence in the future of a world governed by hopefulness rather than fear; confidence in the search for truth; and *confidence that what unites us is stronger than what often seems to divide us.*” [Emphasis added.]

I liked Pastor Jimmy, despite our vast differences. I don't agree with him that homosexuality is a sin, but I do agree we all have our sins. I don't subscribe to his system of belief, but I do believe he holds love at the center. Religiously, theologically, we were miles apart, but I believe if our churches were in the same town, we actually could find common ground and collaborate in meaningful ways. There would be no reason why our church and his couldn't collaborate in creating bag lunches for hungry kids. There would be no reason why we couldn't link arms to care for the earth. There would be no reason, that is, except for an unwillingness to tread delicately into conversation or a belief that the gulf between us is too wide.

I think it is natural for the human spirit to want to rest in the comfort of sameness. But spiritual growth involves a certain amount of challenge: Growing in spirit means to take risks and to be open and vulnerable to real difference – it means to relinquish defensiveness in favor of curiosity and conviction that, with dedication and work, points of connection can be found. I find myself so thirsty for that kind of growth nowadays. Perhaps it is the Presidential race heating up and promising to be as rancorous and polarizing as past elections. Perhaps it is the effects of living in such a white, largely middle class community, with so many like-minded people in my particular orbit. Perhaps it is witnessing the vicious racism that still plagues our country. Perhaps it is all of those things and more.

We live in a world of difference – a world where difference are amplified, where stridency – not diplomacy – garners attention. When those things happen, anger mounts, polarization increases, extremism explodes. Everyone is diminished when accentuating differences isolates us in our safe, uniform groups. This past week, I have read with absolute horror, the reports about ISIS making sex slaves out of captive Yazidi women and girls. Such abhorrent behavior is only possible in a system that is completely self-referential in nature – a system that values only sameness, that respects only its own members and disregards all others.

Making a world of difference means to create a world, together, where diverse people live alongside each other, but find common ground to guide their work together. Finding common ground – especially among people who would seem to be so different from one another – is not easy. It requires patience, listening, and sharing, all of which call for taking risks and opening to vulnerability. It requires letting go of assumptions about the other's viewpoint so that nuance can surface. Doing *that* means opening ourselves to surprise. Most especially, finding common ground requires putting the areas of disagreement to the side so that commonalities can emerge and a willingness to be surprised when stereotypes fall away.

There is something else, too. Interfaith work involves embracing imperfection. Misunderstanding will occur. Communication will falter. But you keep returning to the table.

The first Parliament of World Religions was far from perfect. Christian and Jewish religions were emphasized. Other religions were marginalized. Western thought was given plenty of space. Eastern thought was squeezed in around the edges. But still the interfaith dialogue continues, each time crossing new bridges and opening up new understandings. Every one of us can have a part in that in our own encounters with difference.

If Pastor Jimmy were to plunk the story of his encounter with me down into one of his sermons, I don't know what he would say. But I think he liked me, too. He certainly would have experienced me as respectful, a good listener, and someone willing to go the distance to explore areas of mutuality. Perhaps because I was willing to be and do all those things, some of his own stereotypes of religious liberals in general and Unitarian Universalists in particular fell away.

I do know this: I was grateful for the encounter and blessed by the opportunity to shake loose some of my own rigid thinking. May I, may you, may all people find their way to such rich encounters. May I, may you, may all people find their way to each other. Amen.