

The Search for Common Ground  
A Sermon by Intern Minister Elizabeth Marsh  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville  
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The search for common ground... it can be a really hard thing to search for, can't it? Well, sometimes yes, sometimes no. Unitarian Universalists are actually pretty good at working to find the pieces that unite us. I think especially of the times at big family gatherings, where we meet again with people we haven't seen in a while... at family reunions that will be happening over the summer, at Thanksgiving dinner tables...or weddings, like the one our minister, Reverend Lynn, is attending later today as her daughter gets married.

We find common ground during those occasions when we get together and avoid talking about religion and politics with certain relatives. I've got relatives like that, I'm sure you do, too. We know that certain conversations would only incite anger and tension—so we know that there are lots of other conversations we can have. It's like a Venn diagram, where each of us is a circle and we overlap with other people's circles, and where the overlap is, we talk about weather, sports, the family, gardening... things we mutually care about. That's a kind of common ground.

It's something we do all the time. To get by in everyday life, sitting elbow to elbow with strangers on the Metro, or coming to church with people you marginally know... we like to come to church together because it's a high concentration of people who are similar to us in many ways. Common ground is generally easy here.

Sometimes in life, though, it's a lot harder to find even a small space of commonality between us and someone else. I was originally sparked to reflect on this topic because of the divisiveness I see on television and hear about on the radio, divisions between everybody on nearly any political wing.

Just to be upfront about it, I'm a political progressive (you really can't make assumptions), and lately I find myself frustrated and saddened when I watch TV news reports of people speaking at Tea Party rallies, or hear Republican lawmakers filibuster bills that I deeply believe would do us a lot of good. What deepens my confusion even more, is that I know Republicans feel just as frustrated when Democrats or the Green Party speak on TV... we each feel threatened by the other, and our defensiveness piles on top of defensiveness, leaving gigantic barriers between us and other human beings.

What's really beyond those labels—Democrat, Republican, progressive, conservative? And why do we hesitate to go to that place beyond the labels?

In some settings the term "Democrat" can serve to swiftly dismiss a person's worthiness to even be there, before they've even had a chance to speak. Same goes for "Republican" in other settings. We can make someone's deep and complicated humanity disappear based on any number of labels: Evangelical. Fundamentalist. Feminist. Devout... Unitarian Universalist.

What gives me hope in all of this... and even more than hope, what enlivens me with the thrill of possibility, is a third way--something between the either/or idea of Democrat versus Republican. Woman versus man. Black versus white.

I know that our political system is set up to maintain a two party system. I know that our media outlets exist because they respond to those same dualities that keep our eyes on the television. But in the reality of realities, each of us knows that within the labels we use, there is so much diversity. So much complexity.

Like Dr. Farajajé said in our reading earlier, "We CAN hold more than 2 things at a time in creative, dynamic tension." Each of us is a living example of this creative, dynamic tension. We're more than a label, more than a box to check off on the census. And the tension comes because some of the things about us don't easily fit together.

You've probably heard of the Voluntary Simplicity movement, which encourages people to reduce the amount of things we own, where we can commit to living lighter on the Earth. Let's also start a Voluntary Complexity movement—where we commit to living in the creative, dynamic tensions of our lives without having to easily tie things up in a bow and call it finished.

Why must we as religious people especially commit to acknowledging and living in this voluntary complexity? To live in this third way between the "either/or", to really honor our own multi-layered lives allows others to live their lives, too.

If complexity is a truth of life, we must live that truth and allow people to really *be*. We are called to resist the hate, to reverse the erasure of millions of people that "either/or" thinking produces. And this is the hard part: even if we don't like another person's multi-layered life, we are called to love them. To hate or dismiss one person's story is to dismiss a part of our own.

My own story doesn't fit neatly into a tidy, bow-tied box—and I bet yours doesn't, either. I am a walking, talking contradiction. I shouldn't be here, by many accounts. But here I am, a young female minister—because I am female, many religious traditions would not recognize me as a minister, able to stand before you and speak something of the truth.

And to many of you, I am *young* at 32 years of age. But ask the young people in the K-1 Religious Education classroom, and I'm as old as—well, as their parents, and that's really old to them!

Many of you know different things about me, depending on how we've interacted during my internship with UUCR this year. Just for illustration, here are some other systems of identification into which I fit, and these might or might not help you understand me more:

I already said I'm a political progressive, and I'll add to that, I'm a religious liberal. My Myers Briggs type is Introverted Sensing Feeling Perceiving, or ISFP; my astrological sign is Aries—but that's not all, that's just my sun sign. My moon sign is Aquarius and my rising is Gemini. On the Enneagram, I'm a 2, which is apparently common among ministry types. Last but not least, I'm the oldest child in the birth order of my family.

So you can see... whether you buy into any of the astrology or the psychological tests that people use to understand ourselves better, you can see there's a lot that goes into making me who I am, and an equal lot of things would go into making you who you are. But those things I just rattled off still do not tell the story of me, or who each of us are as human beings. There is no other human being on Earth who is exactly like us—and this is what unites us, too. Together, we do our best to live in Voluntary Complexity, honoring the intersecting, dancing multiplicities of our lives.

Each of the facets of our lives goes into shaping who we are. When I was growing up as a child, I didn't realize that all of my experiences in school, with my family, and in church, were influenced by the fact that I was a girl rather than a boy. I also didn't realize until much later how Roman Catholic heritage, dabbling in Baptist Vacation Bible School for a few summers, and my family's financial struggles—all of this would affect how I understand the world. And each of these things affects how I understand the other things... it's all very messy, and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Life is messy, it is complex, isn't it? I don't often talk about being raised poor, because I'm still affected by the shame I've felt since around age 8, and these feelings have most likely affected my empowerment elsewhere in my life. But don't worry about me, I've worked through a lot of it...

I was in third grade, and two classmates of mine, girls, approached me and asked if I was on welfare. I didn't know what that meant, but they were the fancy girls in our grade and the way they asked it, welfare didn't seem good. So I went home and asked my mom what welfare meant, and is that us? She explained it and said, yes, we were receiving money from that program, because

dad got laid off from his job in the tool manufacturing plant last year, remember? I did remember, and I never again spoke with my friends about my family's hardships, even though a good portion of kids in my neighborhood were in similar situations. Sometimes it's hard to reconcile my modest background with my trajectory toward comfortable, middle class life. But I don't have to reconcile them; they're just there...part of my story.

I tell you my own story not to compete for sympathy, or to get your pity (or your votes, like some politicians we know), but to elicit your own story. Where, in your life, is the unacknowledged complexity? What about your life story complicates the choice of "either/or"?

As for my story, like for yours, if anyone attempts to put us in a box, we quickly find that the box doesn't actually fit us. The box only fits for that person who wants to put us in it.

Dr. Farajajé of Starr King School wrote, "Let's not provide boxes into which people must fit: let us *let each* other show up with all of our pieces."

As Unitarian Universalists, many of us say that we strive to have more multicultural congregations. Let us continue on this journey by acknowledging that each of us already shows up here with all of our many pieces; that there is a lot of diversity in this congregation already. We may hesitate to acknowledge that, especially because we tend to think of diversity only in terms of race. And that whiteness means raceless, or means no diversity.

But let's complicate that notion. Look around.... Sure, many of us have white skin, that's not the whole story. Are we all Norwegian American? No. There are people of Sicilian, Armenian, Basque, Bosnian, and Irish descent in this room. We only think of them all as one category, "white," because of the assimilation that our ancestors chose to go through when they came to live in this country.

Because of that assimilation, we've lost the particular cultural expressions of those heritages. Yet some of us *are* familiar with our heritage and its cultural traditions. We must honor that.

Another question: Are we all heterosexual? No. Are all the gay people gay men? No. Are we all fully abled bodied? No. Can we all claim to come from the same generation? No. There are people from the World War II/Greatest Generation, as well as Baby Boomers, Generation X'ers, and maybe even some Millennials. Hello to all of us!

And considering the religious nature of our gathering, some of us here were

raised as Unitarian Universalists, while others of us arrived at a UU congregation from other religious traditions. It is common to find quite a number of former Catholics in Unitarian Universalist congregations. I'm one of them, and with the number of former Catholics here, sometimes I begin to wonder if I really -am- all that different.

So if you will, please raise your hand if you have experience in the Catholic Church... right, there are many of us... thank you... but my experience of Catholicism, and also of Unitarian Universalism, will be different than a woman who lived in a convent, or a man who was kicked out of the Church because he's gay, or from someone who was Catholic in Boston or Catholic in Brazil, or a person whose mother was Catholic but father was Jewish, or Baptist. See? There are so many different layers of experience to consider when we imagine how complex our lives really are.

There's no such thing as just being "one thing." Our creative, dynamic tensions play out every day. It's kind of like life is an essay test, day after day. We really want life to be an easy, True/False test. Or, at best, we hope life might be a multiple choice test, where one of the choices is "D. All of the above." But the newness of each day, and the interwoven, messy experiences each of us has, means that life is one essay test after another. All the teachers here in the room will acknowledge that essay tests are harder to grade, because they ask the pupil to answer with creativity. We are asked to meet life with creativity.

And here is the luscious paradox: in this Voluntary Complexity is where we find common ground with others. What unites us is that each of us is a multi-faceted, multi-layered person. That first way of imagining common ground, like a Venn diagram where parts of our one-dimensional circles overlap with others' flat circles, becomes not enough. This multi-faceted, complex reality is more like the Venn diagram turned on its side and there appears a messy, three dimensional matrix if you will, or a colorful, abstract art project full of textures and depth. And we are all a part of this dynamic, creative tension.

To go back to the example I used toward the beginning: of Democrat and Republican, conservative or liberal.... Tea Party or Green Party (hey, how about a Green Tea Party?).... One change we can make, right now, is to not let ourselves be taken in by the "either/or" thinking that is fueling the violent, hate-filled reports in the news.

Our *joy* will be to think, speak, and act in ways that complicate that too-simple binary. We know the simple "either/or" is not the whole truth of human experience. "Either/or" thinking erases millions of people who live in the space between two choices.

As people of faith, we recognize and make visible the presence of all those erased by dualisms. Listen to Amy Goodman on Democracy Now! Read books by women from Ghana or from the barrio in Los Angeles. Watch movies by queer Muslims. Question where the Spanish-language Passover greeting cards are. Tell *your* story when someone over-generalizes about one group of people or another. Commit to practice Voluntary Complexity, as a religious act.

Blessed be, and Amen.