

The attraction of Otherness

Sermon preached by Rev. Maria Pap
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan
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Reading: lyrics of "Let's call the whole thing off" by Ira Gershwin

"You say either and I say either, You say neither and I say neither
Either, either, neither, neither, Let's call the whole thing off.."

Dear Friends,

Do those lyrics sound familiar? Do they ring any bells?

You do not have to be a fan of old musicals with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in order to appreciate the truth expressed by the song. Life is about encounters and about an unending fascination with the otherness. Otherness in people, in places, in events, in experiences.

What is different, what is strange, what is completely opposite and outside our experience is always fascinating. This fascination can have several layers and several outcomes. At one end of the scale you have annoyance and fright and perhaps even disgust, while at the other you have interest, a thirst for comprehension, and finally acceptance. The first fascination can end up in hate, the second one in love.

Today I will try to talk about the second one -- about that quickening of pulse, about the racing of thoughts and emotions, about that desperate effort of our intellect to grab, to analyze, to make sense of this strange encounter with the different, with the other.

The difference is so out of place, so unexplainable, so ridiculous that we succumb to the desire of exploring it and by the time we wake up -- it is too late -- we have been taken in head over heels. This is love. Most of the time it does not make any sense, but this is one of territories of our lives, where we do not want to be sensible. To love and be wise is good advice from those who never experienced the butterflies in their stomachs or that sensation of floating above the ground, or that exhilarating desire to embrace and love the whole humanity, which overcomes us so rarely otherwise.

What ultimately triggers love, we will never know for sure, but we do know from personal experience that the attraction of the otherness comes into it somewhere. Opposites attract -- a title of a song, a fact of life. Opposites attract, but let me add, at least in the early stages, because later on the situation might change. And this is where the problems of our lives and relationships start. What in the beginning was a source of wonder and delight might turn out in the long run to be a source of annoyance and distress.

- I love to dance -- but you have two left feet.
- I am an early riser and it pains me to see you in bed until noon.
- I like classical music, you like rock. You think my music affected and snobbish; your music gives me a headache.
- You are an intelligent person, so why are you reading mystery stories instead of Austen or Joyce?
- My relatives are all angels to various degrees, yours are all a bunch of unfeeling morons.

And so on and so forth. That attraction born out of our dissimilarities, which gave the zest and depth of our relationship, is turning sour. Those differences we praised, we wallowed in, start to be too much to bear, too much to cope with -- we start to realize the width of the gap between us.

Should we call the whole thing off? It is not an easy question to answer -- and the longer it takes to figure it out the wider the gap will become. Some will never be able to fill this gap but many do so -- and this is how we have happy marriages and long-lasting partnerships.

What is the secret? Well, nothing out of the ordinary, really, just the realization that love is not enough. It takes lots of patience and understanding and compromise, lots of victories and defeats to be able to see not just the dissimilarities but the commonalities too. To accept the differences graciously and to discover and strengthen the common strands in our life makes the difference between parting and staying, between giving up and trudging forth.

This is true for couples but it is true for the partnership between our congregations too. What attracted us to each other, when we started to get to know the other side a little bit better, was the otherness, the strangeness, the unknown. And let me assure you that we are really wallowing in dissimilarities. Even if I scheme and exaggerate a little, I could go on for hours about all the differences between our communities on the whole spectrum, ranging from theology to our everyday life.

Let me enumerate a few:

- We belong to a minority ethnic group, Hungarians living in Romania, feeling always threatened in our heritage and culture, a group, whose loyalty for the state is always under suspicion and whose members feel many times second-rate citizens. For you, as American citizens this is hard to understand, as you have the safety and assurance of belonging to your country, which was never questioned.
- We are simple people, with most of our congregations in villages and most of our parishioners farmers eking out painstakingly a living from the land, people who do not travel further than the nearby small town, whose dreams and aspirations never soar above the land they inhabit. In contrast you are over-educated, sophisticated people, with exquisite tastes, with many of you widely traveled and well-versed in the ways of the world.
- We live in a country so small that is hard to find it on the map and our language is so weird that nobody really bothers to learn it. In contrast your country is a super-power of the world and your language is the “lingua franca” of today.
- We are born into our religious community, while you have chosen yours. We have no choice in the matter, which is why sometimes we are so careless with our heritage, taking it for granted, while you give all your best abilities to further the cause you have chosen.
- We are Christian in our theology, while many of you have left behind traditional Christian communities to search for your spiritual freedom and for many of you every reminder is full of pain.
- We put the community’s needs before the individual ones, while for you the individual’s rights and aspirations shape your community.
- We are poor people with our congregations struggling to get along, while economically you are well-off.
- We are traditional communities trying to survive in this globalized world, which is slowly running us over, while you are a liberal community taking in its stride any challenge.

So, if we need strangeness or even incompatibility to get attracted to each other, we cannot complain, we have the whole range. Our problem is that turning point in every relationship when these dissimilarities instead of being interesting or appealing turn towards obnoxious and incomprehensible -- when we start wondering if perhaps the gap is too big to be filled with love and good intentions.

Can we find the common threads of our life when so many things separate and set us apart? Can we look beyond the unquestioned attraction of love to the honest assessment and acceptance of our differences and to what these might teach us about the other and about ourselves? We can but try if we do not want to call the whole thing off.

As I get older I find myself quoting Shakespeare more and more, a wonderful fellow Shakespeare, apt to have a quote for every occasion. In his 116th Sonnet, he says: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.” Of course, he is talking about love, and so far that is what we have done too. We talked about love and we were silent about the impediments. But admitted or not, talked about or not, they are there and we need to face them. One impediment is the major imbalance in our relationship, which as far as I know was never acknowledged. This is not something new or unexpected, as in every relationship there is inherent imbalance -- one of the partners always gives more than it receives. It depends on both sides if this could be worked out without resentment and loss of self-esteem. In our partnership you are the ones, who in our perception are continually giving, while we are unable to return it. This is surely true in financial terms and although we are immensely grateful for your help, we struggle with the sentiment of indebtedness. I wonder, too how do you feel or what your reaction is, when you are asked for financial

support for a congregation about whom you barely know and whose theology and outlook on life is so different from yours?

The inducement and references to our common heritage, to our roots might sound hollow for those who do not know and are not interested in the history of the denomination. Like Pallas Athena springing forth from the head of Zeus, for many of you the relationship starts with this community in this given time and place and a past history might not be that relevant. Yet, what we can offer would shed light not just on your denomination's history but on all those values for which you chose it. Because even if on the surface we are very different, even if we use God-language, even if we are village farmers far away from the world of Academia, the basic values of our lives are the same and have their roots in our faith.

- When we talk of God and you of Spirit of life -- we try to express the same human desire, the same human aspiration to overcome our limitations, to understand and make sense of our life and struggle, to feel the connectedness with the world around us.
- When we fight for our rights to keep our culture, our heritage and when you fight for the rights of gays and lesbians -- we are treading the same path in our struggle for the right of minority groups, for the freedom and dignity of every human being.
- When we proclaim our faith in human reason, when we uphold the necessity and importance of a liberal education, the tolerance and acceptance of others, we do on a small scale what you are doing on a larger scale in your society -- working against injustice, intolerance, and division.
- When we gather together as a community or when you gather together as a community -- we and you do it to affirm what we believe, to proclaim that we belong, to enjoy our togetherness and to strengthen our community in working for the vision of a better world.

It is true -- all this we do on a different scale from you, using a different language, in a different context and with all the limitations our society, culture and history imposes on us. But for you to perceive this, you have to overcome the fascination of either rejection or love and move beyond the surface.

For this I would like to use the analogy of our home. I know that we are culturally conditioned to be nice to the guests, be they friends or acquaintances, but the place we take them in our house speaks volumes about our relationship with them. Depending on the level of intimacy, we take them to the parlor or the kitchen and serve them coffee in china or a mug. The parlor many times is suggesting the distance, the conventions of our society, while in the kitchen there is no need for pretense. They can see the unwashed dishes in the sink or look into the pot -- we feel comfortable enough to be whom we really are. They are not family, in a sense they are strangers, different, but belonging to us.

This does not mean that we will not have secrets from each other. For a healthy relationship individuals or communities have to have their seventh room, which will remain perhaps forever closed for us. We will still have our own ways of doing things but we will be willing to accept that there could be other alternatives.

Still, there are plenty of rooms in the house of our life worth sharing and exploring and I invite you to do that. You have the open mind to admit the impediments, to accept the dissimilarities and work with us to find the common thread.

- You have the means and possibilities to visit us, to get to know us better, to be part even if it is for a short period, of our life and struggles.
- You have the awareness and sensibility to help us in restoring some balance in our partnership by accepting the gifts we can offer -- our homes, our hearts, our gratitude, our community.

But for that we need to move beyond the attraction of otherness on both sides -- because in time this is going to fade away and what are we going to be left with? I hope that the answer might be -- with each other. With two communities in different parts of the world, in different circumstances, with different challenges but holding up the same values and bound together in partnership, support and understanding.

Let ours be a partnership of true minds that admit the impediments but are willing to work to overcome it in love, acceptance and dedication for the benefit of both communities.