

## Worship Service

March 13, 2016

### Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

#### Opening Words/Call to Worship

Come Sit By Our Fire

By Jennifer Kitchen

Come sit by our fire and let us share stories. Let me hear your tales of far off lands, wanderer, and I will tell you of my travels. Share your experience of the holy with me, worshipper, and I will tell you of that which I find divine. Come and stay, lover of leaving, for ours is no caravan of despair, but of hope. We would hear your stories of grief and sorrow as readily as those of joy and laughter, for there is a time and a place and a hearing for all the stories of this world. Stories are the breath and word of the spirit of life, that power that we name love. Come, for our fire is warm and we have seats for all. Come, again and yet again, come speak to me of what fills your heart, what engages your mind, what resides in your soul. Come, let us worship together.

#### Meditation:

*Let us reflect on these words adapted from a poem Leo Thomas.*

*To be or not to be .....*

If being is a way of thought,  
Then not-being or becoming is what lies beyond.  
Our thoughts, our beliefs, are our ways of thinking.  
What lies beyond are ideals and beliefs outside our own.

Shakespeare had it right when he said,  
"To be or not to be--that is the question."

Ours is to choose:

Are we only "to be" -- limited forever by our own thought paradigms?

Or are we "not to be" -- opened to explore and integrate new paradigms and possibilities into our own?

"To be or not to be,"  
That, is still the question...

## **Reading: Beyond Borders**

By Rick Hoyt

Go forth  
Because we are always going forth from somewhere

Going from our homes, our childhoods  
Going from our cities and countries  
Going from innocence to experience to enlightenment

Going into mystery and questions  
Going into the desert  
Getting to the other side.

Go forth,  
Leave behind the comfort and community of one place  
Head into the anxiety and loneliness of another.

Carry with you the love and laughter of this place  
And let it light your way  
Carry with you the wisdom you learned  
and the good memories  
May they give you strength for your journey

And when you have been away long enough, far enough,  
Done what you'd set off to do  
Been there so long  
That place too, starts to feel like home

Come back  
Come back to the one, universal  
Everywhere and every when and everyone inclusive home,  
This beloved community of all creation  
That you can never really leave.

## WORKING ACROSS CULTURES

Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, PhD

November, 1991 my phone rang. The call came on behalf of the Chairwoman of the National Council of Women in Thailand. It was an invitation come work with them to develop a programme of research that could inform strategies to help rural women avoid infection with HIV.

I had traveled only once outside the US and Canada on a holiday to Mexico.

I tried to dissuade my callers – they needed an anthropologist or at least someone who was knowledgeable about Thailand – they said they would provide the knowledge about Thailand ... they had read my publications (only 2 at this point). They wanted me to come and had agreement from the Canadian consulate in Thailand to pay for the trip.

I was a relatively freshly minted PhD, having returned to graduate school in my early 40s. After consulting with senior colleagues. I agreed to go to Khon Kaen, Thailand for a 2 week working session to plan a research agenda. I didn't anticipate being involved more than the 2 week visit.

The partnership with Thai colleagues lasted for 6 years. During that time we researched and developed programmes and strategies to reduce women's vulnerability to HIV infection that fit within the culture, social structure and political-economy of rural villages in northeast Thailand.

Over those 6 years I learned

- how to eat like a northeastern Thai (just about the spiciest food in the country and includes various insect forms),
- appropriate forms and styles of communication for different occasions (I had never before encountered such a structured diversity of styles of communication depending on the status, purpose, and circumstances),
- how to 'read' the unspoken messages conveyed in body language, eyes and face,
- how to ask questions about sensitive topics and how to interpret the answers,
- how to sit, stand, and whether and how low to bow to people of different status.

All of these are the visible parts of what we call culture. I also began to learn and understand parts that are below the surface:

- the different ways of thinking and assessing situations
- how karma fits into daily life,
- the way in which logic works and what is taken into consideration in forming logical judgements or making a decision,
- how things are placed on a hierarchy of values – how priorities are set.

It was this learning that led to the development of programmes and strategies that proved to be both effective, self sustaining, and enduring. Strategies that some 20 years later, are still in the villages and markets, having become part of how things happen and having shifted and adjusted to changing circumstances, that is, having become part of culture.

The strategies were very different in content and form from anything in Canada. They combined the science of HIV prevention – which is really very simple – with Thai culture. They have been credited with being part of what brought Thailand's rate of infection down from being one of the highest in the world in the 1980s and 90s to a position where Canada is among the countries considered to have relatively low rates of infection.

The cornerstone of all of this is culture...

Culture is universal. Everyone 'has it.' The survival of human beings depends on it. Humans are weak in comparison to other animals. Our advantage, is our big brain and opposable thumb. Evolutionary biologists like Joseph Henrich (*The Secret of Our Success*) have concluded what anthropologists have said for a long time, these species characteristics were only advantageous because we are social animals (like ants and bees and bison and elephants) – we live in herds. In those herds we developed culture. Culture provides us with the ability to survive and flourish in diverse contexts. It isn't passed on genetically –but is learned socially and therefore, while culture is universal, the content of cultures is not. There is no commonality in core values, beliefs, motivations.

Let me try a simple analogy to convey something about culture. Imagine you are a fish. You're swimming in water. That water is different if it is in the ocean, a lake or a bay where river and ocean meet. But as a fish you aren't aware of the water, it just is.

Culture is like that water – we live in it, it makes our particular kind of lives possible. It is different depending on geography, climate, and history. Most of the time we don't know it's there. Unlike fish and water, humans create culture and they change culture in response to changing contexts. But, those changes are always based on and preserve elements of the culture that came before. Another simple example – our school calendar fits an agricultural society, but we stick to it even though we are no longer very agricultural. Compare to other countries – 3 terms of 3 months each with 1 month off in between (Sept-Nov/Jan-March/May-July).

We think, value, hope and dream in a particular way because of our culture. Our way of doing these is right for us. It is our civilized way of being and doing things. When we encounter folks from another culture who think, value, hope, dream and do things differently, the more distant or different these are from our own ways, the more likely we are to see them as uncivilized, barbaric, wrong. Historically, and still today, these are at the root of many wars, massacres, holocausts, genocides, residential schools, forced re-education.

Six years of going back and forth between Thailand and Canada was my first experience of working across cultures. It was followed, a few years later, by a project in Kenya working with a nongovernment organization, the Ministries of Education and Health, and Britain's Department for International Development, to research, produce, and evaluate HIV education curricula and teacher training programmes that could be delivered across the country. I have many stories to tell about learning parts of Kenya's cultures. The programmes we developed were far greater successes than I imagined they could be. They have been absorbed into the culture of Kenya's schools and are held up as gold standards by the World Bank and UNAIDS with the approach we used to developing them taught in some of the leading graduate programmes in the U.S. and Europe. We succeeded where other research teams, including from internationally prestigious universities, failed. How did they fail?

- Some were not accepted by the communities;
- Some were not feasible to deliver in Kenyan schools;
- Some were far too costly to maintain given the education budget.

The consensus is that we succeeded because what we developed was closely suited to the multiple local cultures and to the systems of schooling.

- They were enthusiastically accepted by communities rather than being banned from their schools. Remember this was a programme about AIDS and dealt with sexuality, condoms, and plenty of taboo subjects. Communities that weren't yet part of the programming, bribed, pleaded, and threatened trainers to get them to come to their village and train their teachers.
- They were feasible for delivery to the over 18,000 primary schools in Kenya. District education officers and teacher training colleges, at the prompting (pleading and threatening) of their communities, worked with our team to develop a way to fast-track training so that a critical mass of teachers could be trained in 4 years. A sufficient number to deliver the programme to schools in all but the conflict-ridden regions of the country.
- Costs were minimal because we used exclusively local resources (both in schools and in the training of teachers) and designed the programme to be delivered in the most poorly resourced schools.

How does this happen? I tell graduate students and colleagues who aspire to work across cultures that they need to be prepared to be challenged and shaken right down to their very core. Those challenges include how to work, interact, and communicate in very different places, what I call the *process of being, doing, and thinking*. For themselves and for whatever they develop. But also to be prepared to have their core values and assumptions shaken up and challenged.

Let me illustrate with a story:

The setting is sitting under a tree in Kenya where the research team is having lunch. All of the team members have a university education, most with master's degrees and some with PhDs. The women on the research team asked me: "Can we ask you something about Canada?" I have since learned this is a dangerous question. But, my answer is always "Of course you can." They ask: "What do Canadian women have against polygamy?"

OH BOY – Polygamy is not part of my value system. My mind was quickly racing through thoughts: some of the team members may be from or are currently living in polygynous families; how do I present Canadian views which are typically articulated in a very value-laden way, derogatory of anyone who doesn't agree in a way that is respectful?

I did a lot of umming and ahhing and said things like:

Canadians don't really have experience with polygamy and so don't understand it. It isn't part of our history or traditions. All we hear is bad things about polygamy – about women being oppressed and forced into being one among many wives.

We are not willing to 'share' a husband. We feel there would be less of a marriage – one wife among many has less power or status in the relationship. We really are very jealous when it comes to our husbands being with other women. We see being one of several wives as degrading.

Can anyone think of anything else I should have said in explaining our views?

My colleagues listened respectfully. And then expressed pity for Canadian women. They felt that because of a narrow-minded, uninformed view we were closing the door, missing out on something that gave them power, independence, and freedom.

They said that multiple wives shared childcare, housework, cooking, farming, income earning, taking care of the husband. They had more power, not less. You could always find one or more of your sisters/cowives to agree with you, and often all agreed. It was the husbands who lacked power since there was only one of them against many women.

Then they asked if I had worked when my children were young. Who looked after the children? When I explained daycare, their response was along the lines of: "You would trust someone whom you pay?" They explained that in polygyny the wives/mothers share childcare and the work outside the home. Even poor women, women who earn too little to pay for help, could be away from home either working or traveling. Children always have a mother looking after them.

I asked about sharing the husband – his affections, time, attention. That brought a laugh. They might be sharing a husband, but have ready-made women companions and friends; their affections, time and attention. And, after all, women understand each other far better than men understand them. PLUS, when the husband is being difficult, you have other women to help resolve the difficulties he is causing.

They said they hear that the divorce rate in North America is very high and that women were most often disadvantaged in divorce. Their view was that this was a danger inherent in monogamy. When there are only 2 people and especially when the wife is isolated from strong bonds with other women, disagreements will happen and there is no one to intervene, no one to distract, to dissuade the parties and the disagreement just goes on and on and becomes the centre of the family.

Well into the discussion they commented: It is all right if Canadian women want monogamy, but why do they feel they must impose it on the rest of the world? Why do they think anything but monogamy is evil and harmful to women? Why can't they see that we want the right to choose whether we want to be the only wife or have other wives?

There was much more to this conversation – it delved into immigration and what would happen if a polygynous family wanted to immigrate to Canada. What if they wanted to visit Canada? Why didn't Canadian feminists take up this cause and insist on women's right to choose?

Over the years there were many more conversations that began "Eleanor, can we ask you a question about Canada?" Those questions were rarely about safe topics like the weather, although I was asked why we choose to live in a country with such long winters and a dull landscape in the winter. The topics varies depending on the local culture. In Thailand I was asked by a group of young women why we arrest sex workers. In Nigeria I was asked how Canadian women could think so little of their bodies and themselves that they would have sex without expecting something in return. Among people from the middle East I was asked why the United States feels it must impose democracy on everyone, whether they want it or not. Among southeast Asians I was asked why we felt arranged marriages were bad and harmful to women. In each conversation I came away with much deeper insights into the beneficial aspects of the position my team members were espousing. I came away recognizing that my ways, our ways, were not universally best or right. They were right for us, they fit the fabric of our culture. But that didn't make them inherently, universally right for everyone.

These conversations shook me down to my core values, they profoundly challenged my assumptions about what is good and right. They have led me to wonder whether we, Canadians, fully understand the 'fundamental principles' articulated in our Multiculturalism Act, especially the one that says

All citizens are ... have the freedom to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.

We have said it, but do we know what this means, do we embrace it?

Working across cultures has challenged me to think more deeply about our way of being, thinking, living, valuing. I recognize it as cultural, specific to this place, this time, these circumstances, and this history. I recognize that other ways are not necessarily bad, worse, or less, even when they make me feel uncomfortable or threatened. They are most certainly

different. As I come to experience different cultures, I come to see my own more clearly, to see that there is much in all cultures, including my own, that is beneficial, also much that is harmful. The difference is that our own culture is to us like water is to a fish – it just is, it is often invisible to us, it is the 'to be' of the meditation reading.

As Canada becomes home to more and more people from vastly different cultures, the question for us is how we will make them 'at home' in Canada. How we will learn and respect their cultural ways, how we will teach them about ours, and how we will negotiate the differences. How will we construct a Canada from multiculturalism.

Leo Thomas' poem poses this well. I leave it with you as my closing comment:

*To be or not to be .....*

If being is a way of thought,  
Then not-being or becoming is what lies beyond.  
Our thoughts, our beliefs, are our ways of thinking.  
What lies beyond are ideals and beliefs outside our own.

Shakespeare had it right when he said,  
"To be or not to be--that is the question."  
Ours is to choose:  
Are we only "to be" -- limited forever by our own thought paradigms?  
Or are we "not to be" -- opened to explore and integrate new paradigms and possibilities into our own?

"To be or not to be,"  
That, is still the question...



**Benediction** by Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe

With what benediction shall I leave you?

This: In your life, may you know the holy meaning, the mystery that breaks into it every moment.

May you live at peace with your world and at peace with yourself.

And may the love of truth guide you in your every day. Amen.