

**Message:** *Why Our Democracy Needs Diversity*, an original talk by Shannon Anderson

It is fitting that this month's theme of Unity and Diversity kicks off during the Fourth of July weekend. Independence Day does not celebrate the freedom of American people that at the time of 1776 was not a unified freedom. People of color and women, and even men who didn't own property, could not vote in the new Republic. Rather Independence Day celebrates the independence of our nation from the monarchy of England. It is a day that forgets the diversity of experience that brought us to this point and instead focuses on the unity that we all live within the geographic boundaries of what is now the nation that declared its independence back in 1776.

As Frederick Douglas put it in his famous speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," *"I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us."*

Mark Charles has a similar modern reflection in his essay "The Dilemma of the Fourth of July" published in Native News Online. He says, *"As a nation, the United States of America does not share a common memory, and therefore struggles to have a true community."*

So, herein lies the question not only of the Fourth of July but also of this month's theme. Can there truly be a conjunctive "and" between unity and diversity or rather does diversity of history and experience create a disjunctive lack of unity? Can we be united and yet still divided by socio-economic background, systemic racism, patriarchy, prejudice, and all of the things? Is diversity of experience being helpful or is it a hindrance for unity across our nation and moving our democracy forward? These are the questions I hope you'll ponder with me this morning and throughout this month.

Malcolm Forbes defined diversity as "the art of thinking independently, together." In other words he believed there can be unity with diversity. Diverse thought of opinion and perspective creates independence from one another but you can bring all of the diversity together through a united government and society. At least that is what he was trying to say, I think. I have to admit, I'm still struggling with this. How can you be independent and yet together? How can those thinking differently from each other be unified? Again, I am left with more questions than answers.

Perhaps the UU theme-makers want us to forgo pondering these deeper questions and rather focus on our own spiritual beliefs. We are Unitarian Universalists after all. We draw from the diversity of the world's religions and bring them together in unity without prejudice or judgment. We take the good parts, meld them together, and unify it all into something even better with the sum of the parts. We lead with love, and everything else follows from that. When love is your center and your foundation, you embrace similarities rather than focus on differences. You appreciate diversity but do not dwell on it. Equity, justice, and inclusion come naturally when you seek out unity because of our diversity, not in spite of it.

So, if we UUs can create a conjunctive “and” between unity and diversity every Sunday why can’t broader society find unity and diversity in a much bigger way?

In searching the interwebs for inspiration for today’s talk, Wikipedia sent me down the path of learning about Unity *in* Diversity. This concept that dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century explains that “unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation” shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological differences towards a more complex unity based on an understanding that difference enriches human interactions. The idea is that by embracing diversity and creating an inclusive social environment, the interactions amongst us will have increased creativity and innovation, improved decision-making, enhanced cultural awareness, improved communication, and increased empathy and understanding. Like a good brainstorming session, diversity brings a much better result when unified together.

But at times our push for unity silences diversity, resulting in Unity *Over* Diversity. The headlines abound with this theme – limiting immigration, passing laws that restrict self identity and autonomy, calling those who support environmental protection “extreme,” or naming anyone who values diversity of opinion and thought as “woke” or “left” or other words meant to marginalize or label them as unwelcome to the unity our leaders seek.

Last week our state superintendent released a plan to create a Civics Ed Center. While the idea itself may have noble aspects, the statements associated with it again seemed to push unity over diversity. She said, “I worry that there are too many children across this country growing up without a love for America.” That statement made me pause. First off, she talks about children all over the nation when I thought she was supposed to be focused on children in Wyoming. But more importantly, it’s a statement that leaves the reader wondering why – why are children not loving their country? And who is to blame for this travesty? It focuses on othering these children, and presumably their parents and caretakers who must be forcing them to not be patriotic. So, I ask our superintendent whether forcing civics lessons on these so-called dissenting children in an effort to instill unity in them is really going to solve this so-called problem of children not loving America. Of course not. The history of the world exemplifies that forcing unity has never resulted in a permanent quiet of dissent. And yet, those who believe unity can only be created without diversity continue to try to do exactly that. They stand in opposition to the famous quote, “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism,” and rather believe that patriotism can only be expressed without dissent.

That creates a challenge for those of us who believe that diversity strengthens our constitutional republic, our spiritual life, and our human interactions. We need to maintain our dissent of those who push unity *over* diversity, but at the same time strive to achieve unity *in* diversity in our daily lives and broader society.

Leticia Miranda wrote in an article, that *“It is necessary to understand that diversity is a social construction. This means that distinctions do not exist in themselves; it is we, as a*

*society, who construct parameters of what is ugly, beautiful, strange and correct, among others.*” But as opposed to letting these socially constructed distinctions drive us apart, she adds that by welcoming diversity, society can be more inclusive or should I say unified. She states, “Diversity is in our daily lives in all spaces. This means experiencing traditions, learning new skills, and having a broader and less selfish view of ourselves to build a more just society. This is the importance of diversity: providing the opportunity to strengthen our development as a society.”

I have put a lot of questions out there for you today, and perhaps a few answers. We have challenging times ahead for us as a community (however community may be defined for you), as a state, and especially as a nation of patriotic dissenters. But I know you will rise to meet these challenges, and in the pursuit of unity and a more perfect union, bring others along the way with you.

Because it is Olympics season, a time when the world’s diversity and indomitable spirit is on full display, I’ll leave you with the thought that the top two gymnasts in our country are Black. Simone Biles and Fred Richard are shining stars in this world that can sometimes be a little too dark. They remind us that strength and power come in many forms and can be wielded to create good. So, thanks to them for creating good and thanks to all of you for doing the same as much as you can in your everyday lives.