

# The Mending Wall

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Welcome to this gathering for the celebration of our community.

I am glad that you are here.

Today's reading is from Robert Frost.(1), whose poetry seems to embody the American experience and culture. Though Frost was born in San Francisco, much of his imagery is quintessentially New England, his adopted home. New England is also a principle influence on who we are as Unitarian Universalists.. Boston is the home of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In "Mending Wall" Frost personifies the individualism of American culture, including the nuances of xenophobia and New England restraint.

"Good fences make for good neighbors" was a motto, a creedal statement that I heard often as a child. I understand that clear boundaries with others usually minimizes misunderstandings, but clear boundaries do not necessarily have to come in the way of formidable structures intended to prohibit any exchange beyond the most superficial.

The wall makes it clear that anyone on the other side is not welcome. Even if there is a door or gate along the way, the presence of the wall itself speaks so much loader than does the minimal voice of an opening, which in area is exponentially smaller than the combined area of the fence or wall.

Though there might be a door, and even if the door is open, it is quite possible that others won't feel welcome to come inside. In this congregation, and maybe in our movement as Unitarian Universalists, do we have walls of which we are unaware? Is it possible that we are waiting at an open door, wondering where everyone is, when they don't feel like their invited to come in?

These are the questions I'd like to explore today.

Before I get too far into this though, I need to ask a favor. I would like to know, by show of hands:

How many of you have been involved with this congregation for 10 years or more?

How many of you have been involved with this congregation for less than 10 years?

Without trying to make an assumption, the statistics for most churches show that, in effect, they become completely "new congregations" about every 5-7 years due to attrition, new memberships and changes in both the overall social, cultural and political climates.

This means that though there are some members who have been here for several decades, this is not the same church that it was in, say 1974, nor is it the same church it was in 1994. I have been involved here for less than two years, and yet I am here to welcome all of you, from visitors to founding members, to today's service.

You know "welcome" is a word we hear over and over again in our Unitarian Universalist culture. Webster's New World Dictionary says that the word "welcome" comes from the old English *willa* — meaning pleasure, and *cuma* — meaning guest, and Webster defines "welcome" as "gladly or cordially received; freely or willingly permitted or invited." Just under that, the word "Welcoming" is defined as "to greet with pleasure and hospitality" or "to meet, receive or acknowledge in a specified way; to greet." It seems there needs to be both an invitation and a greeting in the ritual of welcoming.

This congregation went through the Unitarian Universalist "Welcoming Congregation" program about 15 years ago. The "Welcoming Congregation" is a program supported by the UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) that encourages our member congregations to become more inclusive with respect to Gays, Lesbians, Transgenders, Bisexuals or anyone questioning their sexual orientation.(2) There are 13 goals listed as qualities a congregation needs in order to publicly claim the title, "Welcoming Congregation."(3)

My guess is that most of us here would not know what those 13 points are. Many of us may have never heard the term "Welcoming Congregation" in the context of an official program of the UUA, nor would many of us know that this congregation is listed as one. Mount Diablo is not only listed as one, but it was one of the first UU congregations in the nation to sign on and complete the program. This is an accomplishment to be proud of. And if the commitment to the "welcoming congregation" program is not re-affirmed each year, the success lies in the past, not in today.

I believe that much our lack of diversity within the Unitarian Universalist movement has more to do with our lack of awareness of our own corporate culture than a lack of outreach to those who are missing from our congregations. Part of that the conversation I would love to see happening here at this church and within our greater movement is about the differences in individualism and collectivism.

Some of the key differences between individualist and collectivist cultures are:

I—Fostering independence and individual achievement.

C—Fostering interdependence and group success.

I—Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, personal choice.

C—Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus.

I—Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life.

C—Understanding the physical world in the context of its meaning for human life.

I—Associated with private property, individual ownership.

C—Associated with shared property, group ownership.(4)

Many Asian cultures, some Black cultures, most Native American cultures, Deaf and Hard of Hearing culture and Latino/a culture are but a few examples of collectivism. Not all members are collectivist, but in the United States there are significant populations of these and other peoples whose primary cultural identity is more collective than individualist.

On the first and third Sundays here we are fortunate enough to have Randy Schoesler do sign interpreting for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. I believe that he is the only sign interpreter for a UU congregation in the entire Bay Area. Sadly the conversation about offering sign interpreting usually goes, “Why do we need a sign interpreter? Do we have any deaf people attending?”

The answer to that is simple — no we don’t, or at least not that I am aware of. The real question could be, “Why would anyone one who is deaf even think of attending our church if we don’t offer sign interpretation?” There seems to be an assumption that until we “need it,” we shouldn’t provide the services. The reality is that if, as a community, we don’t provide the services, we are excluding anyone who might need them from attending, much less joining our community.

The invitation has to come first, then the greeting at the door. I would say that it takes a church community that is not accustomed to sign interpretation at least one-and-a-half to two years to adjust before they should even think of inviting the Deaf community to their services. Time and again, I hear people complaining that the interpreter is distracting. Some individuals, with good intentions, suggest moving the interpreter off to the side and forming a Deaf section.

The reality is that unless the interpreter is no more than about five feet away from the speaker, a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person cannot watch the speaker and the interpreter at the same time. Can you imagine what it would be like to Ping-Pong your head through an entire service trying to get the words from one person off over here, while trying to watch the facial expressions, and overall personality and presentation of the speaker who is at the podium? How would you feel if you were only allowed to sit in one section of church in order to participate in worship?

I would certainly not feel “graciously received” if that were the case. You might as well just mail me out the transcript of what the speaker said than expect me to put up with that. This is one example of opening the door, but the wall is greater than the door. There is so much more work to making a commitment to be welcoming than just throwing the door open.

Many Deaf and Hard of Hearing people have their own culture. Many do not have the same culture as the hearing culture, and yet some do. Deaf culture is a thriving, dynamic, integral part of many Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals. In general terms, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Culture is collectivist rather than the individualist culture of the Hearing.(5)

Part of the problem for Unitarian Universalism is that mainstream culture in the United States is already individualist, but I believe that UU culture is more individualist than mainstream culture. When a Deaf person walks through the door of a UU church they are not only confronted with a different system of communication, and one that often tries to place them in a subordinate position, but they are culturally oppressed by the dominant culture of Unitarian Universalism.

The sharing of personal information, maintaining direct eye contact, the difference in personal physical distance between individuals, appropriate touch, and the giving and receiving of feedback and criticism are only a few of the areas that are quite different between the Deaf and Hard of Hearing culture and Mainstream Hearing culture. (6)

I am not saying that one is better than the other, nor that we should change our culture to be more like theirs or anyone else's. I am asking the question, “Do we ever take the time to see, to notice who is not here”? Then take the time to wonder “why not?” The first step to addressing cultural differences is to become aware

of them, to educate ourselves not only about other cultures, but also to acknowledge the privilege and power of our own.

Many of us, but by no means all of us, are at least in some ways a part of our society's dominant culture. As Unitarian Universalists, I believe we are called to question our own sense of privilege. I believe our principles of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, and the celebration of the web of existence, calls us to become aware that there are other cultures and to refrain from reinforcing our own to the exclusion of others in our worship, our committee meetings, our canvass and our religious education.

I believe that the free quest for truth, the honoring of the scientific method, the democratic process and the inclusion of reason within religion are valuable foundations for living. They are by no means the only viable means of navigating life successfully. The extremes of our principles can fall into objectivism. Objectivism relies on Aristotelean principles almost to the exclusion of any other positive philosophical teachings.<sup>(7)</sup> And like many movements or religions, in an extreme fundamentalist reading, objectivism becomes racist and classist.

On searching the Internet I found several sites whose primary articles were critical of "collectivism" as a cultural system that, according to them, is lower on the evolutionary scale than individualism.

Here are two examples of the articles I found that privilege individualism to the exclusion of collectivism: one that appears on The Objectivist Center's Web site is entitled, "Report from the Front: Japan's Killer Collectivism."<sup>(8)</sup> It literally depicts any country or peoples that maintain a collective culture as killing its population or committing communal suicide.

The second is from the Jewish Agency for Israel and is entitled, "Westernization and the decline of Collective Culture." It depicts a New Israel leaving behind the primitive collectivism of the past and embracing the Individualism of America.<sup>(9)</sup>

Collectivism as a cultural identity has been successful throughout recorded history and is just as viable and successful today. Unitarian Universalism is particularly seated in the western culture of the United States, and yet our purposes and principles provide a framework to transcend both the privilege and the restrictions of our own culture.

There is room at the UU table for collectivists, individualists and objectivists. We are called to be present with others in their search for truth and meaning, and to share authentically of our own journey.

I am proud to be associated with the congregation of Mount Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church. Each of us has the opportunity to continue the work being done here and then to “boldly go where no one has gone before,” charting the realms between cultures.

Yes, our door is open. Many of our members are actively involved in cross-cultural programs and groups that are creating a new vision for the future.

In Robert Frost’s poem he presents a vision of his neighbor, for a moment, as the primal human armed with a rock in each hand. Frost asks the question, “Why?” and “Who am I walling out? or “Who am I walling in?” Is building a wall compatible with being welcoming? Maybe the wall has been there so long we no longer see it.

In order to welcome —

First we have to extend an invitation. We also have to allow ourselves to change and grow as others become a part of us.

And we must celebrate the diversity of our own community at every gathering, maybe not every group each time, but always more than just the one cultural assumption. I will commit to challenging my own assumptions around culture. I invite you to join me in asking the question, “The door’s open—who’s not here and why?”

*Necesitamos todas las buenas manos.(10)*

We need all the good hands.

- 1) Edward Connery Lathem, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 33.
- 2) UUA, *Welcoming Congregation*, (online source, accessed November 7, 2003), [<http://www.uua.org/obgltc/wcp/wc1expln.html>].
- 3) Ibid., 2.
- 4) WestEd, (online source accessed November 7, 2003), [[http://www.wested.org/online\\_pubs/bridging/part3.shtml](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/bridging/part3.shtml)], 1.
- 5) Sign Enhancers video #8M, *See what I Mean: Difference between Deaf and Hearing Cultures*, (Eye to Eye Productions, 2001) Available at the public library.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Dr. Leonard Peikoff, *The Philosophy of Objectivism: A Brief Summary*, (online source accessed November 8, 2003), [<http://aynrand.org/objectivism/pobs.html>], excerpt from *The Ominous Parallels* (Plume Books, 1997).

- 8) The Objectivist Center, *Report from the Front: Japan's Killer Collectivism*, (online source accessed November 7, 2003), [[http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/ehudgins\\_rff-japans-killer-collectivism.asp](http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/ehudgins_rff-japans-killer-collectivism.asp)].
- 9) The Jewish Agency for Israel, *Westernization and the Decline of Collective Culture*, (online source accessed November 7, 2003), [<http://www.jafi.org.il/education/culture/onisraeli/14-west.html>].
- 10) The “Message for All Ages” was the children’s book, *Todas Las Buenas Manos*, by Francisca Isabel Campoy—A story in Spanish describing all the “hands” needed to make up a community.