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PARADIGM SHIFT OR HAVING A TASTE OF MY OWN MEDICINE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo

At the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Baltimore

May 17, 2009

I offer my heartfelt congratulations to this congregation for its efforts on behalf of civil marriage for the gay population, for its advocacy for the immigrants, for its success with the Legislative Ministry, and for its generosity in sharing its Sunday contributions with so many worthy causes, through the “Change for Change” project.

I have titled my sermon “Paradigm Shift, or Taking a Taste of my Own Medicine” and soon you will realize the reason for this title. Preparing for today helped me in gauging again, where I am in my struggle to understand, talk, and act, as a true Unitarian Universalist, regarding the issues of social justice, diversity, and personal growth. I have learned that both the individual and the communal difficult work for equality, justice, and inclusiveness require flexibility to adopt new strategies, and constant determination to stay the course. This work is done step by step, change by change, always in hope of true transformation.

Today it is my pleasure to honor, even if it is in a small way, your enthusiasm for social justice by sharing part of my spiritual journey with you. I was born in Colombia, where I spent my school years in boarding school with Catholic nuns. Unfortunately, they were products of a prejudiced society and of a very conservative church. With the nuns, mostly, but also at home during vacations, I learned to distinguish between “good people,” those like us, and “bad or strange people,” those different from us and with whom we should never associate.

In 1964, I accepted an invitation to come to the United States as an Assistant Visiting

Professor of Demography at University of California at Berkeley. Along with my personal belongings, I brought a bag of prejudices against, and stereotypes of people I considered the “stranger” and the “other”. (As I share the contents of my bag I invite you to examine the content of yours). Where to start? Let us see:

The indigenous population. They were those savages who should be forever grateful to the valiant Spaniards who brought them civilization and the true religion.

The Yankees. Those pale people, tricking us into accepting their outdated tractors, and arms, in "exchange" for our oil, our precious woods, and other natural resources.

The Jews. God punished them to wander on earth for having crucified Jesus.

The Protestants. When I was a child, there were very few converted to Protestantism.

Those were doomed people, walking on the wrong path led astray by the “gringos” who took them away from the one and only true religion.

The blacks. A whole African continent was teeming with pagans, whose salvation depended on the Catholic missionaries, and on good girls like me.

The Turkish and the Polish immigrants, who were sorry people, selling textiles from door to door; and of course, the cunning gypsies.

Being raised in a patriarchal society meant that I grew prejudiced against myself and other women. Sadly, I internalized very quickly and early, that as a woman, I was inferior by nature to even the least deserving of men.

My father's ancestors were Spaniards. My mother's were Spaniards, and indigenous from the Andes. In my country of birth I grew up as a white person. Here, in my adopted country, my birthplace and last name became the core of the paradigm shift I had to undergo before I could gain my true identity. That paradigm shift began one Sunday in 1991. A member of my congregation approached me during the social hour. He said: "the Unitarian Universalist Association is interested in learning how many people of color there are in the denomination, so could you please fill this questionnaire and return it to me?"

Driving home that Sunday, my head was spinning as I started realizing that the person I thought I was, was not the same person others thought I was. This was bewildering! My next reaction was the feeling of betrayal by my new faith. After having renounced Catholicism and having been in spiritual exile for many years, I had found my true spiritual home in Unitarian Universalism. There, I was encouraged to get rid of my prejudices and to gain pride in being a woman. I was so happy in my Unitarian Universalist theological honeymoon thinking what freedom! No more pretensions, no more labels, just freedom of thought and action, and so many opportunities to realize my dreams. And now, this church that had educated me on the devastating effects of racism, sexism, and other isms, this church, was labeling me and as a person of color at that!

It didn't take me long to start making petty comparisons between the color of my skin and that of others. I noticed that many of those considered whites were darker than I. I compared my education, professional career, and housing facilities with some of the whitest in my congregation, and kept wondering why on earth people thought that white skin alone made someone better and even superior.

In the seminary I completed my paradigm shift. There, I became truly aware of the extent of racism in the world, in myself, and sadly, in our denomination as well. I understood the twofold effect that racism was having on me. On the one hand, as a racist white Hispanic, (remember the contents of my prejudice bag?) I was feeling the shame and the pain of recognizing this ugly fact in my existence. On the other hand, now that I was aware of my lower status as person of color, I was feeling angry and humiliated. I no longer could minimize or ignore the fact that on several occasions my children and I have been discriminated against; the most hurtful instance being when I wanted to buy certain house, and was told point blank by the realtor, that I could not even see that house because it was located in an area not available to Hispanics.

I must confess that it took me a while to be in solidarity with those who proudly accept the label “person of color”, and that it took me even longer to accept that label for myself. This is because I am of the conviction that classifying people according to skin color, surname, or birthplace to put them in their place --so to speak-- is not only evil, but genetically increasingly inaccurate. Just think, how many people in the United States can with absolute certainty say that they are pure white? That in their blood they don't have the least trace of Native American, Black, Asian, Hispanic, or any other ethnicity whose blood is labeled blood of color?

Fitzpatrick, the great sociologist, and scholar in Puerto Rican life, remarked: *In Puerto Rico a drop of white blood makes a person white. In the United States, a drop of black blood makes a person black.* What criterion should we use? These things are so subjective . . . I myself have been asked if I am French, Greek, Italian, Brazilian, German, yes! German, even Californian! And few weeks ago, I was asked if I was from

the Check republic. The issue of blood purity was another important and confusing component of my Paradigm Shift. In Colombia I had learned that my blood was a rich mixture of many bloods: Goth, Visigoth, Roman, Arabic, and indigenous to name a few. Being so genetically endowed was cause of pride. In contrast, here I learned that such richness made my blood impure, and a lesser person of me. Just think for a moment how inaccurate is to ascribe inferiority or superiority to entire continents based solely on such superficial and misleading trait as skin color or geographical location. It is very difficult not to feel sadness and anger realizing how insidious and damaging racism is. It is also very difficult not to give into despair realizing how easily, like destructive viruses, we transmit prejudices of all kinds from childhood on, from generation to generation.

Fortunately, our denomination is renewing its efforts to become racially diverse. To that end it has developed several initiatives to dismantle institutional racism in the entire Association and hopefully, to influence that dismantling in our society at large. The best example of commitment and action in this regard that I know is the First Unitarian Church of San Jose. Attending the challenge of its janitor (a refugee from El Salvador who has been under the sanctuary program of the church) to share this precious faith with the Latinos in the city, the Senior Minister, the Rev. Lindi Ramsden learned Spanish, and started offering services once a month. Later, with a grant from the Extension Ministry program of the UUA, the church called the Rev. Lilia Cuervo to provide full ministry in Spanish. A by product of that ministry is the “Canciones del Camino” a hymnal supplement in Spanish being published by Skinner House and which will be promoted at the GA this June, 2009.

Social justice and antiracism work is hard work for those trying to be inclusive,

and for those wanting to be included. Seeing the other as inferior, as the cause of one's guilt, or as one's burden, prevents true friendship and acceptance. Seeing the other as the oppressor, or the cause of one's feelings of inferiority and hopelessness, prevents healthy relationships as well. This is how Martin Luther King, Jr. described one of the main roots of the fear and distance we allow between people:

People don't get along because they fear each other.

People fear each other because they don't know each other.

*They don't know each other because
they have not properly communicated with each other.*

Another giant of integration, the Catholic reformer Lambert Beadvin expressed the necessary steps to eliminate fear, and to attain the desired union among people thus:

In order to unite with one another, we must love one another.

In order to love one another, we must know one another.

In order to know one another, we must go and meet one another.

To conduct effective antiracism work we must move beyond the barriers of guilt and blame, beyond the barriers of ignorance, and complacency. And we must definitely move beyond black and white. For us Unitarian Universalists, the best way to eliminate those barriers and the scourge of racism is to embody our faith principles. An easy task? Of course not! I always maintain that genuine Unitarian Universalism is not for the faint of heart. The practice of our first principle which is *To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, will lead us to learn the appropriate means to properly communicate with each other. The practice of our fourth principle, which is: *To affirm and promote a responsible search for truth and meaning* will lead us to educate ourselves

about the cultures and customs of those we fear because they are different, and to honor their values and dreams. Providing grants, writing checks, and sponsoring projects of social justice is great. However, that is the easiest part. To attain true justice and integration we need to move beyond our impersonal social justice to a personal embodiment of fairness and compassion for all.

On May 5, 1819, William Ellery Channing, called the “father of liberal religion in America” defined Unitarian Christianity in his sermon of ordination of Jared Sparks. That historic day, he said from this pulpit: *If any light can pierce and scatter the clouds of prejudice, is that of a pure example. My brother, may your life preach more loudly than your lips. Yes! May our lives preach more loudly than our lips.* What will be that pure example, and what should our lives preach? I would like to suggest that Channing would be very pleased and proud, if we were to inhabit spiritual justice and let social justice be its fruit. And what could be more spiritually just than to share our precious faith with the thousands that right now are craving a spiritual home such as this? Do you remember your excitement finding this precious faith and making this congregation your spiritual home? Why then deny the same to others just because we consider them different and therefore not worthy of our faith, and our company? What would take for us to go and meet the “strange other” face to face, heart to heart?

Let us individually and collectively take up the challenge of breaking all barriers. Let us open our doors to our hurting world for the sake of our own salvation as a religious denomination, and as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. This congregation and so many others have given so much to the Unitarian Universalist world. Let us expand our generosity beyond our denomination. Let us do it engaging our whole being in a way

that is personal, vibrant, and fearless. Starting right here and right now let us make this congregation, and by extension, our denomination, the tribe of which Alberto Blanco spoke in his poem “My Tribe”.

*But if I have to belong to some tribe
____ I tell myself ____
make it a large tribe,
make it a strong tribe,
one in which nobody
is left out,
in which everybody,
for once and for all
has a God given place.*

Blessed be and Amen.

Alberto Blanco. Dawn of the Senses. City Lights Books. 1995. Pages 3-4.