

## OUR Identity?

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As you might remember, for the next four months, February through May, our monthly worship themes will be our 4 developmental goals: Identity, Welcome, Structure and Worship. All of our goals and outcomes are in place to help us reach the DREAM that was set out in your Developmental Ministry application. The Board believes that if we reach towards these goals and outcomes, this will get us to our shared dream of the kind of congregation we wish to be. Let's remind ourselves of that dream, as we did at the Town Hall meeting last month.

Last year, as we worked on clarifying the Goals and developing a list of desired outcomes, the Board realized that there was a bigger context kind of floating above and around the developmental goals and outcomes. The Board realized that reaching to meet these goals and outcomes is culture change. Culture change is one of the most challenging types of change a community can take on. That's because a culture change is a deep change, not shallow. It requires changes in the community's shared values and beliefs. And these lead to systemic changes in behavior.

Culture change requires being willing to take an unflinching look at what is not helpful in how we live together religiously and committing to a different way of being together. Culture change cannot happen through doing the same thing as has been done in the past. Together, the 4 goals you set out for your developmental ministry speak to a profound change in the culture of this church. A change that you saw as necessary for your very survival.

But it's not just survival. It's not just about continuing. A healthy and vibrant religious community seeks to serve a higher and nobler purpose together. Your dream speaks of carrying out dynamic programs based in our Unitarian Universalist values. Programs that will change the local area here in Omaha and even the wider world.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to set out to change our local community, to make it a more just and beautiful place, as our UU Principles require of us. And then to know that we have succeeded? That we made a difference together? As a community of Unitarian Universalists living our values? Would that not be wonderful?

And those dynamic programs are not just about the folks 'out there.' It's about us, too. Our Principles call us to spiritual and personal growth in all ways. As we grow spiritually, as we seek to become more whole as individuals, and more like the best people we could possibly be, that changes the world, too. Because we are then living and being differently in the world.

So one of the requirements for being a community that calls each person to be their best self and calls us to be our best selves together in changing the world. Clearly, that has to be a community of profound meaning. A community where people can come with the big questions of life and of themselves and explore them with loving and interested others. And also a community that gives us true and real guidance, in keeping with our personal and our shared values, for how we are to live. That's why people come to us – for that kind of meaning.

So, our developmental work together is all about culture change. Changes in shared beliefs, values and behaviors. With the aim of creating powerful meaning for ourselves. Meaning that we can then live out for ourselves and in the wider community. All four of our goals are pointing towards that.

So, over the next 4 months, we are going to focus on one of our goals each month. Now, the worship services are not all going to be about our developmental goals. Rather, I will explore the theme in different ways each month as I usually do with our themes. I do want to note that the goal themes are in a particular order: IDENTITY, WELCOME, STRUCTURE, WORSHIP.

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IDENTITY – comes first because it is the foundation for everything else. The IDENTITY we’re talking about is our shared IDENTITY as Unitarian Universalists here in west Omaha. Our Identity goal statement is:  
*2U has a clear and shared idea of our identity as Unitarian Universalists in this time and place*

Your individual IDENTITY is WHO you ARE – what makes you YOU. Your values, your beliefs, your deepest sense of yourself. All of you.

It’s the same for our shared identity as a community of Unitarian Universalists. Our identity is founded on our shared Principles – currently the 7 in the OOS and the hymnal, perhaps soon to be more! And also on the values those Principles reflect and our shared ideas of what a more beautiful and just world would be like.

Identity can often be confused with Mission/Purpose. Mission or Purpose is what you DO. Identity is who we ARE. See the difference there?

And, just as your own personal identity defines and drives and what you do, so it is for this religious community. Who we are defines and drives what we do. Identity comes before purpose. Identity defines purpose.

Some people might say, at this point:

***Wait a minute! I like my own identity just as it is. I don’t want people here to be telling me my identity has to change or become like everyone else’s.***

That’s not what a congregational identity is. It’s not your individual identity. It is the shared identity we have together here as Unitarian Universalists. It is the values, principles and beliefs that we share as Unitarian Universalists.

And that leads right into another concern that folks might have about Identity.

***Wait a minute! We are not supposed to have a creed or doctrine here. We’re not supposed to tell each other what we should believe.***

That is absolutely true. We are free here to follow systems of belief that have meaning and value for us as individuals. We get to define ourselves religiously as we choose. Some of us affiliate with Christianity, some of us with Humanism, or Paganism, or Agnosticism or Atheism or Buddhism. Many of us do not put ourselves in an existing religious category at all, but have developed our own unique spiritual path. We don’t share the same approach to belief here. We are not required to believe in any religious path – or non-religious path – as a requirement of membership. We are religiously FREE.

So, it's important not to confuse that sense of shared values, that shared way of looking at the world, our shared principles, with a shared religious doctrine or creed. Because we don't have any of those. Not a single one.

One way that my mentor, the Reverend Robert Latham describes this is that we Unitarian Universalists can sometimes confuse the hay for the wagon. We have a UU community wagon, of our shared values and principles. Into that wagon, we are invited to place our own approach to religious belief, our own hay, our Humanist hay, or our Buddhist hay, our Christian hay. I will be pitching in my Pagan hay. And we celebrate all the different crops that we bring and how we live them!

But the only thing that can pull the community's hay forward into its desired future is what ***holds*** the load. And that is the wagon. The values and principles that unite us. Our shared identity. Our identity ***frames*** our unity. And it is our ***unity***, our shared ***foundation***, that makes living out our wonderful ***diversity*** possible. When we confuse the hay for the wagon, we weaken ourselves completely.

And that tension, the tension between our unity and our diversity, and which one is foundational, is worth exploring here a bit.

Let's consider diversity first. Diversity of all types in living systems, including human systems, is seen as critical for health and survival of the system. The more diverse a system is, the more strengths it has, the more flexibility for survival it has, the more gifts and skills it has access to for the best functioning. Often we humans are much more comfortable with human systems made up of people who are more alike in some way. That is our comfort zone, to be with folks like us, whether the similarity is one of race or class or language or culture.

Through my work with many types of human systems, from non-profits to neighborhoods to academic or government groups to congregations, I have come to believe in the great benefits of diverse ***human*** systems also. We are no different from ecological systems in that regard. The more diversity of gifts and skills and abilities that are in a human system, the better. It's better for problem-solving, it's better for strength, it's better for fun and creativity and flexibility and survival. So, diversity is positive and a strength in all kinds of living systems.

We Unitarian Universalists value diversity especially highly. We have no shared doctrine or creed of belief that each of us must follow. We are bound by our principles and our covenants, not by what we believe. Therefore in our congregations, we have a great diversity of approaches to faith and religion and spirituality.

We are in love with our diversity and for very good reasons. This diversity honors human differences of life and experience. It provokes creativity and growth. Diversity brings all the strengths described previously. This is so powerful for us that we have even claimed that our unity ***comes from*** our diversity, that we have ***Unity through our Diversity***.

This belief that our diversity is our foundation has created special problems with grasping both our identity and our purpose as a religious community. Diversity can fragment a system by giving priority to individual wishes, needs and demands. It asks for a ministry that meets each person's private concerns and desires. And this limits our power to work together for personal growth, for social change, for world change. We all want to run off in our own directions and pay attention to what is most interesting and attractive to us. And that means, we may not accomplish very much.

Trying to make our diversity the **source** of our unity limits our ability to live in a truly united way. To live focused on a clear and shared purpose. It can cause us seek personal ego fulfillment in a congregation, rather than striving to live a shared mission together. We can even end up believing that our differences of belief mean we cannot and even **should** not have a shared identity nor should we unite around a shared purpose. And that means we lose a lot of power to make a difference in the world. We lose a lot of genuine community, too.

This is not diversity's fault. It's how we **live** our diversity. Unity does not lie in diversity. Unity, by definition, must rest in commonality. Our diversity lives and survives and thrives **within** our unity. **Diversity Within Unity.** Diversity that rests and lives in the lap of our unity. A unity of common values and shared aims that can support and lift up and create the space where diversity can flourish with all the gifts it brings.

This is true for you as individuals, as spiritual individuals, too. You are each a collection of diverse qualities. What unites you and allows you to live and use and celebrate and share your own diversity of gifts are your bedrock values and principles and beliefs. That is, your IDENTITY.

Our unity is **defined** by our identity. Identity is the wagon that pulls all our different loads of hay. Identity is what pulls us together to live out a shared **purpose**.

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Therefore it is critical that we have a clear sense of that Identity. And this is often a struggle for Unitarian Universalist communities, for reasons I have already mentioned. We can be highly protective of our own individual thoughts, beliefs and values. And we can be strongly resistant to ideas that we think folks are trying to impose on us.

It is wonderful, therefore, that having a shared Identity does neither of those things. Whew. Rather, our Identity defines us in a very basic way. It is our shared Identity that allows us to work towards common purpose in making a positive difference in ourselves, each other and the world. But what, you ask, are the values and principles that make up our Identity?

Well, in two weeks time, we are going to explore that together in worship, doing some small group work together, along with our children and youth.

In the meantime, our hymns and music today give us a hint. We always want people to come to us as they are – *Come, Come Whoever You Are*. Come with your own self in all ways. Come with your diverse religious and philosophical beliefs and values. We want you, just as you are, all of you. You are welcome just as you are.

We heard from Sweet Honey in the Rock – *Will we harbor one another?* Will we harbor those who come to us, seeking shelter from the storm? The song is a question. But I think for us as Unitarian Universalists, the answer is YES. It must be YES. We must harbor one another in every way, as well as those who need us.

We sang of what we want this religious house of ours to be – a house of peace, of questioning and seeking, of freedom, of reverence, of vision, of prophecy and so much more.

And on the cover of the Order of Service, we have powerful words of what it means to be in religious community, to have a sense of shared Identity, from the poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Let's read those words together.

*we are each other's harvest: we are each other's business:  
we are each other's magnitude and bond.*

We are each other's magnitude and bond.

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Yes, we have a shared Identity as Unitarian Universalists in this time and place. And on the 18<sup>th</sup>, we will discover, clarify and state that Identity. Along with our children and youth. And a good story. Or two.

We will get clear about this wagon that we're pulling together here and that will take us further on the journey towards our dream than we have ever been.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.