

**Wisdom Circle – Diversity
January 2016**

PREPARATION

Words of Wisdom

“Isn’t it amazing that we are all made in God’s image, and yet there is so much diversity among his people?”

~Desmond Tutu

“Every person is a new door to a different world.”

~ from Movie “Six Degrees of Separation”

“I think we have to own the fears that we have of each other, and then, in some practical way, some daily way, figure out how to see people differently than the way we were brought up to.”

~ Alice Walker

“Diversity: the art of thinking independently together”

~ Malcolm Forbes

“To appropriate means to take possession of specific aspects of someone else’s culture in unethical, oppressive ways. Cultural appropriation is acting in ways that belie understanding or respect for the historical, social and spiritual context out of which particular traditions and cultural expressions were born.”

~ Jacqui James, “Reckless Borrowing or Appropriate Cultural Sharing?”

“We need to help students and parents cherish and preserve the ethnic and cultural diversity that nourishes and strengthens this community – and this nation.”

~ Cesar Chavez

“The essence of hospitality – and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.”

~ Parker J. Palmer

“Few laypersons and equally few ministers are adequately prepared to plan worship that is inviting and acceptable to UUs of all theological stripes without reducing worship to the least common denominator in a way that leaves everyone in attendance unoffended but also unfulfilled.”

~ 2006 UUA Commission on Appraisal Report: Engaging our Theological Diversity

“...the charm of life is this variety of genius, these contrasts and flavors by which Heaven has modulated the identity of truth.”

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Reading:

According to the makers of the “Intercultural Development Index (IDI),” “Intercultural competence” is:

...the capability to accurately understand and adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonality. Intercultural competence reflects the degree to which cultural differences and commonalities in values, expectations, beliefs, and practices are effectively bridged, an inclusive environment is achieved, and specific differences that exist in your organization are addressed from a “mutual adaptation” perspective.

Being part of a diverse community, such as our UU Church, puts us in situations that test our levels of intercultural competence, and give us opportunities to grow and improve our abilities to “understand and adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonality.”

One of the ways we test and grow our intercultural competence here at First UU is through our worship services. Planning a worship service involves asking questions such as:

- Whose voices and perspectives should be heard in this worship service?
- Which theological and cultural sources ought to be claimed?
- Who is included or served by the messages of this service? Who is not included or served?
- When is it appropriate to use music, readings, or rituals that come from cultures that are not dominant in our congregation?

This last question was the subject of my seminary thesis, “Singing Unfamiliar Songs: Multicultural Music in Unitarian Universalist Worship.” The following is an excerpt from that paper. While I was writing specifically about the use of music in worship services, the same concepts could apply to other areas of church life in which we incorporate voices and traditions from a variety of cultures.

“Creating a Safe Space to Take Risks in Worship” by Jennifer Channin

There is a tension between leading worship *skillfully*, and creating a space in which it is safe for people to take risks and make mistakes in their worship.

The notes of the UUA Taskforce on Cultural Misappropriation call on UU leaders to have understanding and compassion with each other in this endeavor. They recognize that addressing the issue of cultural misappropriation can be painful, and that mistakes are unavoidable, but that it is how we respond to those mistakes when they happen that demonstrates the respect, compassion, and openness of our community. They write,

In this faith, we are trying to create a community that hasn't existed. A multi-faith, multi-racial experience. There is no handbook. What do you do and how do you relate to one another when you are in uncharted territory and there is no road map? At the same time, we recognize that some piece of our religious work is figuring out how to live at risk: not to pretend that there is

some safe haven we are all going to get to, but how we can take risks together because we value what we can do together.¹

One of the reasons UUs try so hard to avoid cultural misappropriation in worship services is because they want church to be a safe space for people of all cultural backgrounds. When people feel hurt by what is said or sung during a worship service they are less likely to feel safe there. However, another aspect of safe space is that it welcomes people to take risks in their worship that they would not be comfortable taking in other areas of their life....

...With so much emphasis placed on preventing cultural misappropriation from taking place, there are very few guidelines for how congregations should address conflicts that do arise as the result of well-meaning but misguided approaches to multicultural worship. One member of the UUA Taskforce on Cultural Misappropriation, Rev. David Takahashi Morris, during a General Assembly “Music Matters” workshop in 2008, said that when having a conversation about cultural misappropriation it is necessary to have a “willingness to discover deep meaning” and to listen “without judgment.” “We have to be willing to deal with when we get it wrong,” he said, “and the pain we have unintentionally inflicted.”²

Thomas Long opens his book, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, with a beautiful metaphor for congregational worship. He likens worship to a breakfast prepared by children for their parents on Mother's Day. “It is always the work of amateurs,” he writes, “people who do this for love, kids in the kitchen overcooking their prayers, half-baking the sermons, and crashing and stumbling through the responses on the way to an act of adoration.”³ In Long's metaphor, the worship leaders are the children, “filled with adoration, carrying our ineptly cooked but lovingly prepared liturgical breakfast,” and it is God who is the parent, “patiently waiting to receive with relish and grace and kindness the burnt offerings we bring.”⁴

Not all UUs believe that it is to God that our worship is directed. Perhaps this is why we are so hard on ourselves when we make mistakes—God may be patient and grace-giving, but we ourselves are not. Can we be, for ourselves, both the risk-taking and love-seeking children and also the forgiving and appreciative parents in Long's metaphor?

Much of the advice that one finds about cultural misappropriation in worship is driven by the fear of making mistakes and the wish to avoid conflict. The intention of this paper has been to offer a different approach. Instead of debating about whether or not we have the “right” to use a particular song in our worship—a worry that inevitably leads to defensiveness and stubbornness when our “right” is questioned—this paper challenges worship leaders to step intentionally and courageously into engagement with our congregations about the very subject that frightens us....

¹ UUA Taskforce on Cultural Misappropriation, “Report”

² The notes from this workshop can be found on the website of the UUA, as of March 21, 2011, <http://www.uua.org/ga/2008/commonthreads/114343.shtml>

³ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, vii.

⁴ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*. iix.

Questions for Reflection:

- What are the identities (e.g. race, gender, nationality, social class, religion, profession, location of your upbringing, sexual orientation, etc...) that most powerfully shape your understanding of yourself? In other words, "It would be difficult to understand who I am without understanding my identity as a _____."
- What identities do you have that are not always known to others? Have you ever hidden or suppressed a part of your identity in order to be safe or to fit in?
- When was a time when you encountered someone who was different from you and it changed your beliefs, assumptions, or worldview?

Spiritual Exercise:

We each have a cultural comfort zone – a set of people, practices, and customs with which we feel “at home”, or at least at ease. For some, this cultural comfort zone is small – particularly if someone has had little exposure to diverse people and cultures. For others, exposure to diversity has widened their cultural comfort zone, allowing them to feel at ease in a wide variety of situations. Whatever the size of your cultural comfort zone, it does have limits. Reflect on your own limits. What are the situations in which you feel at ease, culturally – able to navigate encounters with those who are different from you with minimal stress or discomfort? And what are the situations where interacting with those who are different from you causes you some anxiety, awkwardness, or discomfort? Your spiritual exercise this month is to seek out a cultural environment that is just beyond the limits of your cultural comfort zone, and make an effort to engage with people in that environment. This is an exercise to *stretch* our cultural competency skills, not to toss ourselves into situations we are wholly unprepared for. Depending on your own comfort zone, this might include: Asking for cooking advice from a vendor at an ethnic market; Starting a conversation with someone from work about their holiday traditions; Spending a day exploring a neighborhood you have never explored because it was culturally unfamiliar; Participating in a social justice action with people who are of a different race, culture, or socioeconomic class than your own.

Wisdom Circle – Light Session Plan

This session plan is a suggested guide, not a rigid set of rules. You may adjust this plan as you feel is appropriate in your group.

Gathering & Welcome (~5 min)

Chalice Lighting (~2 min)

Optional Chalice Lighting Words, from Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz

The mission of our faith is:

- To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
- To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
- To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
- And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

Check-In (20-30 minutes)

As you feel comfortable, take 2-3 minutes to share one thing that is lifting your spirits, and one thing that is weighing you down. This is a time for sharing, but not for discussion.

Business (10 minutes)

Use this time for any new business: Welcoming new members; Scheduling future meetings; Revisiting the Covenant; Answering questions about Wisdom Circle processes; Etc...

Discussion (60 minutes)

Introduce Topic. Take Turns Reading aloud the “Words of Wisdom.”

Questions for Reflection:

- What are the identities (e.g. race, gender, nationality, social class, religion, profession, location of your upbringing, sexual orientation, etc...) that most powerfully shape your understanding of yourself? “It would be difficult to understand who I am without understanding my identity as a _____.”
- What identities do you have that are not always known to others? Have you ever hidden or suppressed part of your identity in order to be safe or fit in?
- When was a time when you encountered someone who was different from you and it changed your beliefs, assumptions, or worldview?

Silent Reflection (~2 minutes)

First Responses (Share in the order you feel moved)

Cross-Conversation (Ask questions that invite deeper reflection; Speak from personal experience, and use “I statements”; Avoid explaining or judging)

Final Thoughts (Share in the order you feel moved)

Gratitude (5-10 minutes)

Share 1-2 things that have been meaningful to you from this session.

Closing

Optional Closing Song:

*“Spirit of Life”
(#123 in Singing the Living Tradition)*

*Spirit of life
Come unto me.
Sing in my heart
All the stirrings of compassion.*

*Blow in the wind,
Rise in the sea,
Move in the hand,
Giving life the shape of justice.*

*Roots hold me close,
Wings set me free.
Spirit of life,
Come to me, come to me.*