

## Wisdom Circle – Identity

May 2017

### PREPARATION

#### Words of Wisdom

“I am not *just* a lesbian. I am not *just* a poet. I am not *just* a mother. Honor the complexity of your vision and yourselves.”

~ Audre Lorde

“There are no anglicized accents in this name, no long vowel sounds, and definitely no generic naming associations. There is only Spanish seasoning and a mouth full of mambo when you utter my name. Make no mistake about it- I carry the island of Borinquen not only in my heart, but also in my name. What’s in a name? Well, everything.”

~ Celia San Miguel

“I slip among classifications like water in cupped palms, leaving bits of myself behind. I am quick and deft, for there is no greater fear than the fear of being caught wanting to belong. I am a chameleon. And the best chameleon has no center, no truer sense of self than what he is in the instant.”

~ Andrew X. Pham

“Very little in our language or culture encourages looking at others as parts of ourselves.”

~ Patricia Williams

“He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.”

~ Gabriel García Márquez

“Through others we become ourselves.”

~ Lev S.

Vygotsky

“My friend, I am not what I seem. Seeming is but a garment I wear — a care-woven garment that protects me from thy questionings and thee from my negligence. The "I" in me, my friend, dwells in the house of silence, and therein it shall remain for ever more, unperceived, unapproachable.”

~ Kahlil

Gibran

## Reading by Tania Márquez

Recently, I was having a conversation about identity with a group of young adults. One of them, a young white male, told us how he never thought of himself as “American”, that the label of American didn’t really matter, and that he never subscribed to the national concept of being “American”. Then, during the holidays, he traveled to Singapore with his girlfriend, where, he said he “felt” American like never before. He was the American boyfriend. He couldn’t escape the identity of his nationality tied to his skin color, language, and way of being.

This story resonated with my own. I never thought of myself as Mexican as much as I have, since I moved to the United States. There is something about the gaze of the “other” that brings awareness to our being. When we encounter difference, when our surroundings are not familiar, we begin a journey of, both, defining ourselves and understanding what the ascribed identity given to us by the “other” means.

This experience is too common to migrants. In her book “Americanah”, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care.” I disagree though, with her when she says “stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian”, because I think this is the part of self-reflection, of self-discovery, and of identity claiming that needs to happen, in order for people to feel grounded. Yes, others may just see them merely as “black”, but the lived experience of being Afro-Latino, African, or Afro-Caribbean is unique to the person, and fundamental to their survival.

Think about the question “Who are you?”. How do you answer it? How does its meaning change, depending on context? Do you always give the same answer? How could that answer differ from what you would’ve said about 10 years ago?

I often hear people say that there’s something unchangeable in us, an “essence” they call it. Something that is permanent and that makes us who we are, and they often refer to this as our **real identity**. I am not so sure this is true, and I don’t think our identities are so simple and easy to explain. Our lives are a journey of self-discovery, and, as we grow and move through life, we gain newer and – sometimes -just a deeper understanding of who we are. Who we are changes and sometimes one of our identities becomes more important than others. But we are the sum of all of them, though- not fragmented pieces of ourselves.

The International Society for Research on Identity offers this definition of identity: “the construct of identity refers to the multiple and complex ways in which individuals come to define themselves, whether by choice or ascription.” The complexity of defining ourselves arises from the many variants that come into play, when attempting this definition. We are the product of our environment, and our culture. We are shaped by the people, the customs, the language, the ideas, and the lifestyles that surround us. We, as Walt Whitman said, contain multitudes.

### **Spiritual Exercise –**

The spiritual exercise this month is an invitation to look at the things that have shaped you by completing an identity map. This activity comes from the UUA's curriculum "Building the World We Dream About". The identity map here is an adaptation of The Identity Map created by Rev. Dr. Monica L. Cummings, influenced by the work of Pamela A. Hays. You can find the form and instructions here: [http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/youthoffice/intro\\_white\\_id\\_h3.pdf](http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/youthoffice/intro_white_id_h3.pdf)

Fill out the map and then rank each category in order of each category's importance in your life. 1 being most important and 9 being least important.

Bring your map to your group and share why you rank each category the way you did and whether there were any surprises as you completed this exercise.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- What is good and what is challenging about your identity?
- What is one part of your identity that, if taken away from you, would result in a loss of your understanding of yourself?
- Has your understanding of who you are changed over time? If so, what made it change?
- How have others contributed to shaping the person you are now?
- How have you ascribed identities to others?
- What does being a Unitarian Universalist mean?

## Wisdom Circle – Identity

### 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 reading:*

*“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,*

*The world offers itself to your imagination,*

*Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-*

*Over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”*

*-Mary Oliver*

#### **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...*

#### **Experience with Spiritual Exercise (15-20 minutes)**

*Silent Reflection (~2 minutes)*

*Invite participants to share any insights gained from the spiritual exercise. Participants can take turns sharing what their experience with the exercise was. Insight can also come in the form of resistance to a spiritual exercise or type of spiritual exercise. This is also a time for sharing but not for discussion. (15-18 minutes)*

#### **Discussion (40 minutes)**

*Introduce Topic and invite participants to begin by responding to the following questions.*

- What is good and what is challenging about your identity?
- What is one part of your identity that, if taken away from you, would result in a loss of your understanding of yourself?
- Has your understanding of who you are changed over time? If so, what made it change?
- How have others contributed to shaping the person you are now?
- How have you ascribed identities to others?

- What does it mean to be Unitarian Universalist mean?

*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)*

**Gratitude (5-10 minutes)**

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

**Closing**

Optional Chalice Extinguishing:

“Do you know what you are?  
You are a manuscript of a divine letter.  
You are a mirror reflecting a noble face.  
This universe is not outside of you.  
Look inside yourself;  
everything that you want,  
you are already that.”

—**Rumi**