

Center for Courage and Renewal Habits of the Hearts Series
Habit Two: An Appreciation of the Value of “Otherness”
A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
October 6, 2013

Earlier we heard a story about a Vietnamese girl (Angel Child, Dragon Child by Michele Maria Surat (Author) , Vo Dinh Mai (illus.) who experienced prejudice because she was different from the other kids at school and then, because a wise principal gave the kids the assignment of getting to know each other and particularly for the rude boy to listen to the new girl, they became friends and the girl found acceptance – and more. It would be a very different world if our fear of others – our xenophobia could be overcome as easily as that.

When the United States began to allow Vietnamese families, displaced by the long war there, to immigrate here, there was, initially, considerable social anxiety. It took more than an afternoon stuck in a room with crayons, pencils, and paper, for those tensions to ease. We’ve come a long way and still we know that Anti-Asian prejudice is not gone from our society or our world.

Although slavery was ended by the 13th amendment in 1865, it took the 14th and 15th amendments to legalize equal rights for all races and then until 1964 for the Civil Rights act to secure those rights and 1965 for the Voting Rights Act to be passed so that the right to vote was a reality. Watching the last few presidential elections and the election of President Obama, I see that, while it may be camouflaged, racism is alive. The statistics of poverty, unequal access to good education, health care, housing, as well as the rates of incarceration and other things make it clear that, as a society, we haven’t addressed the systemic issues of race (nor for that matter of class – but that’s another topic).

It takes a long time to enact effective legislation. It takes generations of vigilance to sustain rights so that they are not whisked away or eroded. It takes even longer for racism, itself, to shift, for deeply embedded attitudes of social arrogance to let go, and for diminished sense of worth to make way for confidence and pride, and for the invisible structures that support such attitudes to be removed. It’s a relatively simple thing to take away the sign that says “Colored” at the water fountain and another ensure that there is equal access to clean water, one thing to close down a whites only public swimming pool and another to help all people feel that they are in the swim together.

We know that it can take time on a large social scale for deep change to take root and grow. In part, that’s because we continue, as a species, to split the world in two – us and them or I and the Other.

Most often the Other is a term used to signify a person or group of persons who are different from “me” or “us” and in a way -- whether we are conscious of it or not -- that feels challenging. The Other is the reality, internal or external, that we want – or think we want to control, avoid, or eliminate.

The internal other can be our temper, night mares – or even the aspect of ourselves that has vision, imagination, or the capacity or nerve not to conform. I finally got to see the Book of Mormon this week. There’s a song the Mormon missionaries sing in order to suppress their fears, anger, pain, their gayness – or

whatever. They sing, "When you start to get confused because of thoughts in your head, Don't feel those feelings! Hold them in instead just Turn it off, like a light switch, just go click!" It's cute – but if you've ever really tried to turn your feelings off like a light switch you have a sense of how well that works in the long run.

Most often the other is used to signify another person or group. Palestinian author and scholar, Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, made popular the verb "to otherize". It was a dirty job – but someone has to turn our nouns into verbs.

Otherizing, is when you take a person or persons, and make them the alien, the outsider, the one who is exotic, perhaps threatening. This can be conscious or just a reflex habit that can slip in under your awareness.

This summer Mark and I hosted Fadri, a young man from a Swiss family who are dear friends. We looked for ways to connect and found that we were all Star Trek fans, so we began to watch Star Trek Voyager together. The Captain of the starship Voyager is the strong, wise, and compassionate Kathryn Janeway. The members of the crew are Vulcan, Bolian, Rinaxian, Ocampa, as well as Earthling. The Ship is accidentally flung into galactic deep space 75 light years from earth. Far from home. Episode after episode the crew encounters new life forms and in episode after episode these new life forms are referred to as aliens – even by the wise Captain Janeway. Every time it would happen, I'd wince. This ship and the diverse crew of humanoid life forms are in new territory, sometimes guests on a new planet – in reality – okay it's science fiction – but in science fiction reality the *crew* are the aliens – the life forms they encounter are the residents, citizens, originals.

But there is another aspect – because when someone is other in the sense that I'm using it – we make ourselves the standard, norm, even the implied superior one and the one we are encountering must be measured against us.

There's a continuum along which we can find ourselves as we integrate our encounters with those we have seen as other. We find ourselves at different spots on the continuum at different times – or at different spots with different others.

When I was a child, my Jewish parents had a real prejudice against Germans. When I was little I suspected that German was a code word for Nazi. Both parents were involved in civil rights work, activism for worker's rights, in the peace movement, and had a spirit of solidarity with all people – except, it seemed Germans. At some point they seemed to move along the spectrum and beyond this prejudice so that eventually my mother even bought a Volkswagen once a sin in my family and by the time I met and dated an Austrian it was smooth sailing. Though his geographical distance doomed our relationship.

As Parker Palmer said in the earlier reading -- often we live in tribes or lifestyle enclaves and forget that our ways are not the normal ways or the right ways – but only the ways we have been. Too often we're successful at staying in our tribes and the comfort that brings is both false and ultimately destructive.

The truth is that, in one way or another, there is an "other" in each of us.

Last year, Reverend Colleen and I attended a training on intercultural competency. It was pretty short – so I've got to say that I don't feel that competent intercultural – but it was a start that made me eager to learn and grow more.

We did an exercise in which we were asked to list aspects of ourselves in which we find our identity or are assigned identity by others: race, gender, physical

sex, economic condition, family configuration in childhood, family configuration as an adult, white collar, blue collar, employment, educational background, sexual orientation: gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, curious, ethnic identities, age, generation, physical challenges, learning challenges, mental health issues, history of physical safety or abuse, religious history, current religious identity, nationality, language, citizenship status, the list goes on: Just take a moment think about that list. What are your important identities and why are they important to you?

Then we were asked to narrow those down to the most important 5 – that was really tough. Then the 3 most important. Finally we were asked to choose just one. That was wrenching. Then we found a partner and explained our choices.

We are full of identities and they are integral to who we are. Even the painful histories and the scars – make us who we are now. When these are erased, put down, discounted, judged to be negative – we feel diminished. As Edward Said wrote, “No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points...”

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of being made the other – have you had the experience of being invisible, pushed aside, denied fair participation, looked down on, discounted – because of who you are integrally?

Many years ago, when I was in relationship with another woman, I was at times anxious when we travelled. How to ask for room arrangements at a hotel? Two summers ago in Belarus with my husband Mark I didn't have to think as we registered at hotels. I'm the same person but I can be otherized.

It means that in some settings people don't actually see one another – they see some aspect of each other that they give overwhelming meaning to and let it outweigh or mask everything else.

Sometimes we do this, seemingly with the best of intentions. I found a blog recently, commenting on a New York Times article recommending holiday gifts for the people of color on your list. The blog entry was humorous but incisive. The blogger, whose name I have not yet tracked down wrote: “So, let’s say you’ve got to buy Christmas presents for a friend of yours, but you just don’t know what to get her. gift certificate? new crockpot? But wait! Your friend is Latina! Surely, that’s a hook to get her the perfect Christmas present! But, gosh, you just don’t know anything about Latina heritage. Well, *New York Times* has the perfect gift suggestions: how about a children’s book on Sonia Sotomayor? How about Iman’s book of beauty tips for women of colour? if you’re buying me a present? Well, clearly, because I’m Asian American, I simply *must* have a copy of “Asian Faces”, (a make up book for Asian women). The assumption made here is that people of colour somehow need “race-related” presents, because our race is the be-all and end-all of our identities (and gift wishes) — so, the friend is no longer just a friend, she’s “the Asian friend” or “the Latina friend” or “the Black friend” Meanwhile, your White friends don’t need to be Otherized, since obviously they don’t have racial identities to contend with...” There was great truth in that blog.”

There are also times, when, in an effort to offer acceptance and welcome, people try instead to insist that we’re all the same. In fact it was hard to find a children’s story in which the final line wasn’t – “we’re all the same”. But this – although well-meaning – also erases our full humanity.

Congregational life is the perfect field to coach ourselves in appreciating rather than getting lost in or erasing otherness. The world – this room is full of others. And each of those others has something to bring, to teach, to change us. The rewards for doing that are many:

First: you begin to learn to live in the world as it is and not as you were mistakenly taught it would or could or should be.

Second: you're able to accept and find acceptance for all those sometimes hidden or disowned aspects of yourself that made you the deep, complex, and growing person that you are.

Third: you're able to learn and grow through the insights of others – whose life experience may be radically different than your own – you may be transformed by this learning in such a way that you and your faith community may be able to meet the needs of the wider world more wisely, compassionately and effectively.

Fourth: you're able to give to others and to receive a gift each of us deeply wants – the gift of affirmation, of being seen and honored, of being welcome.

Fifth: by being changed by the encounter with people of diverse life experiences, and vantage points on the world, as well as being changed by facing our own fullness we become both more wise about the nature of the world we live in and more capable of transforming it.

And there are far more. The ability to appreciate otherness allows us to celebrate the real diversity of life – to see and to be seen, to know and to be known.

We practice the habit of appreciating the value of otherness by knowing that we are all in this together and taking that awareness deeper and wider. By looking at the man asking for money and knowing that he is “we” though we are not the same and can't and don't know his story until we listen to it. As I was researching this sermon I saw an amazing TED talk by Aicha el-Wafi the mother of Zacarias Moussaoui who was convicted of a role in the September 11 attacks and Phyllis Rodriguez whose son, Greg, was killed in the attacks. Somehow the two met and connected on a deep level – they each found someone with life experience radically different from and seemingly at odds with their own and yet that deep encounter gave them both a window on a wider world and the greatness of heart to embrace that world and one another.

Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of going to a reception for American Women for International Understanding. It was heartening to see the earnestness with which these women have, for fifty years, made connections with women around the world hoping to deepen that understanding and to turn that understanding into encouragement and support.

We practice the habit of appreciating the value of otherness every time we remind ourselves that what we do and how we do it is only one way. We practice this habit when we encounter people different from ourselves and meet them without the tiny gears of judgment clicking in our minds and when we encounter people who seem like us and we assume that their story will be new and fresh and may be layered with pain and depth that we don't yet know about. And we practice it when we reach out to another person and actually invite and welcome their life story as they unfold it. I practice this habit whenever I cast myself into the deep space between myself and another and instead of seeing either one of us as alien, I see both of us as guests at a

great table of welcome. All of us are guests at that table. And until we make one another truly and fully welcome – we cannot hope to make a true and just welcome for the richness of diversity that exists all around us in this world.

How do we welcome people here? What will make “others” feel welcome? What assumptions do we accidentally make that may make people feel unseen, uninvited, unwelcome?

In their work book on the five habits of the heart the Center for Courage and renewal recommends this exercise: to take time, until we meet again to reflect on who an “other”—whether because of religion, politics, profession, economic class etc.—might be in your life these days. Seek out one person from that “other” group and have a conversation with them, get to know them a little bit, to understand who they are and what they care about.

To have the habit of appreciating the value of otherness, is to realize that we are made deeper, wiser, stronger, more honest, and better by opening our heart and arms and learning the world of the other – the many others – and by growing the greatness of heart to let our encounters change us.

You can practice this tenderly and respectfully at coffee hour – and throughout your week and your life.

Let us make that welcome table together by pulling up our own chairs and serving others with our curiosity, attention, reverence, and our will to greater understanding. The commitment to such a project will take us beyond our comfort zones into a fresh, new world.