

University Worship ~ Stanford University

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Seeking Wholeness: Within and Without
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Readings

Judaism - *Book of Genesis, 1:26a, 1:27*

God said, 'Let us make humanity with our image and likeness... God created humanity with God's image. In the image of God, God created, male and female God created them.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ
וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

Islam - *Al-Quran Surah 49. Al-Hujurat, Ayah 13*

O humankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another.

لِنَعْرِفُوا وَقَبَائِلَ شُعُوبًا وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ وَأَنْتَى ذَكَرٍ مِّنْ خَلْقِنَاكُمْ إِنَّا النَّاسُ أُيُّهَا يَا

Christian - *Book of Acts 17:26-29a*

From one ancestor God made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth; and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps feel their way towards God and find God, for God is not far from each of us, for in God we live and move and have our being.

Hindu - *Vedas, Yajur Veda – Kanda IV*

Be united, be in harmony, in affection, radiant, with kindly thought..., united have I made your minds, your ordinances, your hearts.

Native American - *Black Elk, from Black Elk Speaks*

And I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was.

Baha'i - *Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 150*

All are servants of one God, belong to one humankind, inhabit the same globe, are sheltered beneath the overshadowing dome of heaven and submerged in the sea of divine mercy.

Sikh - *Guru Gobind Singh, Dasam Granth*

Same are the temple and the mosque, and same are the forms of worship therein. All human beings are one though apparently many, realize, therefore, the essential unity of humankind.

Buddhism – *from the Teachings of the Buddha*

The person who experiences the unity of life sees their own self in all beings.

Howard Thurman - *from For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*

“There is a sense of wholeness at the core of humanity
that must abound in all we do;
that marks with reverence our every step,
that has its sway when all else fails;

that wearies out all evil things;
that warms the depths of frozen fears
making friend of foe;
and lasts beyond the living and the dead,
beyond the goals of peace, the ends of war!
This we seek through all our years;
to be complete and of one piece, within and without. “

Reflections

Peace, Shanti, Shalom, Salaam, my friends. It is so good to be with you this morning.

As a child, I grew up as one among many. It was not unusual for me when at my grandparent's dinner table to be surrounded by people of a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Their friends typically included Christians and Jews, Muslims and Hindus, Buddhists and Humanists, and tribal peoples of various Indigenous communities from around the world. This was my world. This was my normal.

I was one among many. One of the many of God's likenesses, one of those created in God's image, all of us sheltered beneath the overshadowing dome of heaven, each part of the whole hoop of the world where all lived together like one being.

I learned that my Christian path was one among many. And that being one among many was a beautiful thing. This was the way that the scriptures of the wisdom traditions described the world, the way that the great teachers and prophets taught about humanity and our relationship to the Divine. At my grandparents' dinner table, I learned that I could celebrate the story of my religion, as a follower of Jesus, while at the same time learning from those who followed different paths.

“From one ancestor God made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth...so that they would search for God and perhaps feel their way towards God and find God.”

What a wondrous world this is that God, or the Great Spirit or Life Force, created with all of this diversity. Male and female, God created us. Different nations and tribes, God created us. United in mind and heart, God created us. In this way, God is the thread that binds us together in our common humanity, to each other, to all living beings and to our mother Earth. In this way, God is the wholeness of which we are but a part. In this way God is more than any of us or our traditions can represent by our selves. I will come back to this shortly.

One of the people around my grandparents' table was The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, African American Christian mystic, writer and teacher. Dr. Thurman was a deeply faithful Christian who understood himself as one among many. We heard his powerful words this morning, “There is a wholeness at the core of humanity that must abound in all we do; that marks with reverence our every step.” Before joining my grandfather at Boston University, Dr. Thurman founded the Church for Fellowship of All People's in San Francisco, which continues to be a reflection of the belief that we are one among many.

But as I grew up, I began to realize that most other people did not share my “one among many” experience, at least not in a positive way. They did not see themselves as part of the nations and tribes all created in God’s image, did not feel that connection to the wholeness at the core of humanity. Instead, I heard people talk about others different from themselves as foreign, as other, as unbelievers, as heathen, or in a more gentile but no less pernicious way, those who did not yet know God through Jesus.

This made me sad as a child. It makes me sad now.

Out of my sadness emerged a parable. I call it the People of the Wells.

Imagine a group of people, a small community, living together in a harsh, dry, barren land. At the center of this community is a well - dug deep into the ground - from which the people who gather around it draw the water that sustains them in the harsh environment of their lives. In fact, there are scattered across this desert many communities, gathered around many wells, but because of the distance that separates them, each community lives in isolation from the other. The people of each well believe that they have found at their well the only way to survive in the desert of their lives. They celebrate this discovery with stories, songs and rituals, and they guard their precious water that gives them life. From time to time travelers from other parts of the desert visit with stories of other mysterious wells, which also seemingly provide water and similarly sustain the lives of other people. But the people of each well generally discount the possibility that any other well could provide the kind of nourishment that theirs does. And so in their separation, their lives go on.

Over time, improved methods of transportation increase the ability of people to cross the desert. People of different wells begin to encounter one another with increasing frequency. There is great confusion at the discovery of these other foreign communities with their strange stories and incomprehensible rituals. While a few are intrigued, for many a feeling of discomfort and fear spreads. There is a sense that something must be done about these others so that the purity of each community’s wells will not be polluted by the others. In response, some groups withdraw into isolation erecting unassailable walls around their well. Other groups see the only remedy as attacking those whom they see as a threat to their well and their existence. For still others an attitude of tolerance begins to emerge. While publicly and politely practicing tolerance of each other, these communities privately maintain the superiority of their well. Each is convinced that their own experience is evidence that their well is the only true well of the water that sustains life in the desert.

It’s not hard to see this parable being played out around us. Our communities, our country, our world are microcosms of the people of the wells. Throughout history fear-based responses to difference have led to horrific injustice and human tragedy. People have built walls (and continue to do so) to keep out people different from themselves. People have rounded up those different from them (including children) in prison camps. For centuries conquest and forced conversion have been violent ways of dealing with differences of culture and

belief. All of this has produced genocide, the Holocaust, crusades, slavery, each having its roots in the dehumanization of the other, often justified by exclusive claims of the truth by one religion, one of the peoples of the wells.

There is no place for exclusivism in religion or in our world. It has been arguably the single greatest source of human misery throughout human history. Religious exclusivism, the belief that one of the many expressions of God is the only way, violates the core tenants of all religions, as we see in this morning's readings.

Christian exclusivists love to quote the Gospel of John Chapter 14, Verse 6, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to God except by me." They quote this as though Jesus, a Jew, was referring to the Christian Church, which didn't exist. Christians should perhaps look at 1st Corinthians Chapter 13, verse 12 for guidance here, "For now we see as though through a glass darkly, only then face to face. Now I know only in part, but then shall I know even as I am known." This teaching, like similar teachings in other traditions, calls for humility, radical humility.

Radical humility asks of us that we understand the power and privilege given to our human differences as socially constructed parts of our identity, products of the world around us and our life experiences, and thereby subject to our human limitations. Now I know only in part. Human diversity can evoke appreciation of the beautiful, unique expressions of a larger whole, one though many, or when these differences are experienced through a fear-based lens, can feed the poisons of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all other fear-based diseases that infect our society. We see this all around us in the world today, purveyors of fear spreading the nonsense of a clash of civilizations, or the heresy of the superiority of one race or religion over another, in order to gain political power by pitting people against each other.

But the teachings of our traditions show that this is antithetical to the magnificence of the Divine, that we are created one among many, and that the limits of our humanness, of our limited human perspectives, means that we like, the people of the wells, have a unique perspective, a valuable perspective, but a partial perspective, and that we do not, cannot see the whole by ourselves, but rather are created in God's image, nations and tribes, so that might get to know one another, and in doing so feel our way towards God.

In working in classrooms, and in communities across the world around issues of the diversity of belief, I use a very simple exercise, a very low tech exercise, that illustrates the absurdity of exclusivism. I invite participants to sit together in a circle. In the middle of the circle I place a box. The box has different images on each side. A question is then posed to the group gathered around the box. "How do you know what the box looks like?" Participants are given two basic ground rules. 1. You cannot move from your place, because we are all bound to these bodies and the perspective from which we see the world. And 2. You can't move the box, because the box is the box, it is the reality around which we live our lives. Again the question is asked, "From your perspective, how do you know what the box looks like?"

Each participant is asked what the box looks like to them. Each describes what they see when they look at the box. One sees a pink and purple flower, the other an orange symbol

with squiggly lines. Inevitably each person sees and describes something different from the others in the group when they look at the box. Hence the first lesson of the box. In looking at the box, or the world around us, we are limited by our perspective from seeing the multi-dimensional reality in which we live.

Back to the original question, “But how do you know what the box looks like?” To “see” the whole of the box, to get a more complete picture of reality, the group needs to ask each person what they see. In this way, they build a collective “view” of the box. Thus the second lesson of the box is that we need to hear the perspectives of others in order to have a more complete picture of the world around us. Or to look at it another way, others need to hear our unique perspective to fill out their picture of the world.

In this exercise, like in life, there are always things that remain a mystery. For example, we cannot see inside the box nor look at the bottom of the box. But the lessons of the box are clear. As human beings our perspectives, shaped by our life experiences, are both unique (and uniquely valuable) and limited (restricted by our perspectives.)

Another lesson of the Box is that it is possible that a person’s view of the box is so close that they do not even realize there is a box. If a person’s perspective has been shaped in isolation from the diverse perspectives of a diverse human community, they may not realize that there are other legitimate ways of looking at the world. Therefore, perspectives learned in isolation from others with different worldviews can lead to exclusivist views of the world in which different views are not seen as relevant or are seen as a threat to one’s own perspective, like in the parable of the wells.

The box exercise teaches that diversity is a resource to a more complete understanding of the world. It reveals that a diversity of perspectives is necessary to solving complex problems, whether they be scientific, technological, political interpersonal, or spiritual in nature. To embrace this, we must first realize that humanity is like a group of people sitting around a box, or gathered around wells in a desert, and that the only way to build a clearer understanding of the box, or the world or God, is to widen our circle of understanding, to appreciate the different perspectives of others, and engage those differences in a creative way. In doing this, in appreciating our different perspectives, we also reach below the surface of our lives. Down to what Thurman called the wholeness at our core.

For you see, there is a final chapter to the parable of the people of the wells. One day a diver exploring the deepest parts of one of the wells in the desert discovered that beneath that desert was a boundless ocean which was the common source for all the wells. Thus the oneness of God, expressed through the diversity of humanity.

In my work through the United Religions Initiative, I see people reaching down beneath the surface of their lives and touching the oceanic divine life force that flows through all of us, drawing on the power of the wholeness at the heart of humanity to serve their communities together. As I travel the world, I see people of different beliefs, cultures and religions, coming together in all of their diversity to learn about one another, and to work together, side by side, engaging the challenges faced by their communities and our world, challenges like education, environmental sustainability, health, poverty, and violence in all its forms.

I have the best job in the world, because every day, I hear good news stories about millions of people spread out across the world, people dedicated to promoting daily, enduring interfaith cooperation, ending religiously motivated violence and creating cultures of peace, justice and healing. This is the work of the United Religions Initiative. And this is the news we need to hear. The news of how sisters and brothers of all beliefs are working together inspired by their faith, but not a faith based on exclusivist superiority, rather a faith rooted in radical humility informed by the teachings of their traditions and by an understanding of the interwovenness of all life.

When our hearts are touched by persons different from ourselves we reach beneath the surface of our lives, beneath the superficial differences that we often think of as primary features of our identities, and we touch that wholeness that lies at our core. In doing so we become more complete, within and without.

We have a magnificent and formidable journey ahead of us. It is the recreation of all of our religious and spiritual movements in ways that reject exclusivism and embrace the unique beauty and truth that lies at the heart of all traditions. In this way, we learn to live as one among many, freeing our own traditions from the idolatrous bonds of exclusivism which have held them captive for so long.

We walk side by side, fellow travelers on life's pathways. I speak of being awakened to the wonder and mystery of the world, using words that reflect my perspective, my window to the Divine, the one whom I call my Lord and my God, Jesus, the Risen Christ. You too speak of being awakened to the wonder and mystery of the world, using words that reflect your window to the Divine through the teachings of the Buddha, of Baha'u'llah, of Lord Mahavir, of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him - teachings from the Torah, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the Vedas, teachings from prophets and poets. As I hear you speak and as I look into your eyes, I see God. I feel God. I experience God in you, not just a partial reflection of my Christian God, but the Creator, the Divine Spirit in whom we all live and move and have our being.

In you I am aware that I am one, among many, and that my task, our task, on this planet, at this time, is to help this country and this world discover not only that we are one among many, but that out of many, we can be one – E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one – complete, and of one piece, within and without.

Peace, Shanti, Shalom, Salaam. May peace be with you, now and always.