

**Building a New Global Commons: Engaging Diversity in a time of Division
Reflections at the Network+Affinity Leadership Conference West 2018**

The Rev. Victor H Kazanjian Jr.
Executive Director, United Religions Initiative

Good afternoon. It is such pleasure to be here with you as we explore Diversity Best Practices together. In many ways, I feel like I have come home in this gathering, having spent more than twenty years in the diversity and inclusion field in higher education, prior to my current role. I realize that I have been missing the language of diverse hiring pools, unconscious bias, micro aggressions, ally-ship, cultural competency and intersectionality, although, as I hope you will see, they continue to be essential in my work in grassroots organizing and global peacebuilding among people of all cultures and religions.

As I begin my time with you, I would like to recognize the first peoples on whose land we gather today, the Ohlone and Coast Miwok peoples indigenous to this part of California. It is my custom to ask permission to speak from members of those tribes, which I have done, and also offer tobacco, which I have with me as a sign of respect. Are there any indigenous sisters or brothers here with us today?

Engaging diversity in a time of division is not new, although these days, in this country it feels particularly urgent. As we know, diversity in human beings is a natural phenomenon. Just like the diversity of plants and other animals in the biosphere, human beings in our socio-sphere display a diversity of characteristics that are physical, intellectual and spiritual. The diverse aspects of human beings emerge from our biological and sociological histories giving birth to unique individuals. Attributes like gender, culture, economic status, nationality, race, religion, sexual identity, all serve as identity forming factors that contribute to the individual and group identities that comprise the extraordinary diversity of human beings on this planet. If we had time, we would do a stand up/sit down exercise right here to observe some of the beautiful diversity in the great garden of humanity gathered here.

Our differences shape our individual worldviews, and this can happen in a way that can either broaden our perspectives and be a source of insight and connection, or promote enclaves of isolation and conflict.

Throughout history, human beings have struggled toward the ideal of creating cohesive, coherent, peaceful and harmonious communities in a world where identity differences abound. These differences have often been and continue to be exploited to privilege some and subjugate others. Our differences have been used as justification for stereotype, prejudice, injustice and some the greatest atrocities in human history.

And today, as we are seeing the normalizing of identity-based dehumanization in the United States, as we are being exhorted to become divided by our differences, and as

people are being driven into corners of fear, desperation and deportation, we are faced with the urgent question of whether on this beautiful planet of ours - in our communities, our schools, and our workplaces - we will allow our differences to be used against our pursuit of cohesive and connected communities or whether we will refuse to be divided and conquered, and instead celebrate and utilize our differences to enable us to realize that which Dr. King visualized as “the beloved community”, a process that I will refer to as the Building of a New Global Commons.

So what is this Global Commons...

There is a picture on the wall of my office. It is picture of the Earth from outer space sent to me by a friend... a picture that she took from the space shuttle which she was piloting. She gave me this beautiful picture. I'm sure you have seen something like it.... An image of the earth from deep in space - the blue, green earth, a perfectly round ball floating in an infinite sea of black. It is a magnificent image, so beautiful, so peaceful, so serene.

Gazing upon that image, it seems unfathomable that upon that beautiful sphere moving through the universe, so many of its diverse inhabitants are mired in conflict, locked in life and death struggles with each other. From thousands of miles up in space one is free from fear and prejudice, injustice and oppression, the sounds and stench of war and violence that plague the peoples of this planet. Reading the daily news, rife with stories of death and destruction, one perhaps yearns for such distance from the suffering below.

But if this was our only view of our world, as an observer from so far away, we would be unaware that on this same planet, amidst the struggle and the suffering, there is life and love, beauty and possibility, cooperation and collaboration, unfolding among people of different identities and cultures. From so far away, we would not see the incredible beauty of the expressions of the many cultures of the world through art, music, literature, dance and ritual. In my current work at URI, I see people in countries around the world, people of differing perspectives engaging in daily acts of compassion and kindness. I see people with different beliefs and backgrounds sharing their cultures with one another, falling in love and forming friendships. I see people of different worldviews gathering to deepen their understanding of each other, to forge bonds of relationship and to work together for the good of their communities and the world.

In this way, the Earth, whether viewed from the distance of space or that which is right next to us, the Earth is a “global commons”. The term “commons” is derived from its ancient usage describing parcels of land that were used “in common” by the people of a village. The village depended upon access to and use of a shared landscape that provided a place of community gathering as well as many necessities such as land to grow food and graze animals and a source water to sustain their lives. Centuries later, in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world, the commons, as Richard Bocking wrote in his book *Reclaiming the Commons*, might also be thought of as those things that are essential to all members of the human community who share the planet. In this context, the commons includes the air we breathe, the water we drink, the seas, forests,

and mountains, the diversity of life itself and also that which humankind has created – language; scientific, cultural, and technical knowledge; health, educational, legal, political and economic systems, the schools in which we teach and learn, the businesses in which we work. The commons, then, is synonymous with that which we must engage together to sustain life, implying a shared commitment to community, cooperation, equality, respect for the rights of others, and the corresponding responsibilities that we bear for each other and life on this planet.

The project of building a new global commons requires leaders who engage diversity in a way that invites everyone in their business and their community to bring their full selves, their authentic selves into the commons of their living spaces and work places so that the places we live and work become places of dialogue and interaction, of encounter and conversation, of inevitable tension and even conflict, but conflict that ultimately helps us to better understand that our perception of our differences makes all the difference as to how we engage one another.

The reason that I say our perception of our differences is because identity factors such as race, gender, religion and a whole host of other dimensions of our identities are socially-constructed. The field of diversity and inclusion has taught us that race and gender are socially constructed categories, and that by assigning positive or negative value to certain characteristics, and corresponding power and privilege, humanity has unleashed the scourge of racism and sexism, leading to race-based and gender-based inequity, injustice and violence. More than 100 years ago, American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois warned us that race was being used as a biological explanation for should be understood to be social and cultural differences between different people. And yet the notion that race and gender are social constructions is still largely not understood by most people, fueling stereotype and prejudice.

Now my work for many years has been focused on the ways in which religion is also a part of the diverse world of multiculturalism. And as such religion is also an identity-based social construction. Now for a priest and pastor to be saying this may come as some surprise. But religion, much like all aspects of culture, is socially constructed, its inspiration given expression through the interpretations of culturally embedded human beings.

Now I am not saying that there is no spiritual dimension to our existence. I actually believe that there is. Nor am I saying that there is no power of life or love greater than ourselves at work within us and around us. I believe this too. And just like the extraordinary beauty of the different cultures of the world, different religions, spiritual practices, Indigenous traditions and humanistic philosophies bring us wisdom and values that enrich our lives. What I am saying is that religion and religious identity, are social constructions, some of which are profoundly beautiful social constructions that reflect a larger reality, while others are damaging and destructive social constructions reflecting the worst of human behavior.

I bring this up today because understanding these intersectional aspects of diversity and inclusion as social constructions is essential to the work of diversity and inclusion, and to the project of building a new global commons. The social constructions in which we live define our identities. They shape our worldviews. They form the lenses through which we see and understand the world around us, and they influence the ways in which we relate to one another. As such these social constructions define and sometimes distort our reality, and require socially constructed remedies in order to become conscious aspects of human behavior. It is these socially constructed remedies that I believe are the most important work of diversity and inclusion as we attempt to build a new global commons in our world today.

My son is a comedian, a professional stand up comedian, who sometimes thinks his dad gets lost in the seriousness of the human condition. So from time to time, he sends me things that offer a less serious but no less profound perspective on the world. Like this little irreverent and yet I think brilliant clip on the intersectionality and social construction of race and religion.

Black Jesus <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APMu32sC2nM>

Sometimes in this work we just have to laugh at our selves and our world.

Let me share a slightly more serious parable that I think will help illustrate how our experiences shape our worldviews and why this is significant to those of us dedicated to diversity and inclusion.

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 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 and learn more about each other. There is great confusion at the discovery of these other foreign communities with there strange stories and incomprehensible rituals. While some are intrigued, for many a feeling of fear spreads throughout the various peoples of the wells. There is a sense that something must be done about these

foreigners 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 a general attitude of tolerance begins to emerge. While publicly and politely practicing tolerance of each other, these communities privately maintains the superiority of their water. Each is convinced that their own experience is evidence that their well is the 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 workplaces, our schools, our communities, our countries are microcosms of this parable and often struggle with the same issues as the people of the wells.

And yet there is something else in us. Something that points below the surface of our lives. Something that perhaps existed in us as children before we were infected by the socially constructed poisons of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and all other fear-based diseases.

Earlier this week I was standing on a beach in Kauai, Hawaii looking out at the magnificent Pacific Ocean. Now I'm an East Coast boy, who grew up on the Atlantic Ocean. These oceans, they look different. They taste different. They feel different. I can float on the Pacific Ocean but I sink like a stone in the Atlantic Ocean. These oceans are beautiful and powerful in different ways. They are different bodies of water, and yet they are both water. Just like we are different bodies, made up mostly of water, and yet we are all human.

And so one day, in the parable of the wells, a diver exploring one of the wells, made a remarkable discovery. Down beneath the surface of the desert that is the home to all our different wells, she discovered a vast ocean of water, a common source for all the wells of the desert.

If our perspectives are so limited by our own experiences that we only see our particularities rather than also the ways in which we are connected to one another beneath the surface of our lives, we are vulnerable to those who would use our differences to divide us, and cut us off from the power of a deeper, common source.

Albert Einstein once wrote,

"Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison of our own isolation by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

One of the barriers to creating a new global commons is our inability to see the limits of our own perspectives formed by our unique life experiences and circumstances. When the limits of our perspectives are not acknowledged, our lives can become separated

from others in the ways that Einstein suggests. For example, my life experiences, (my family of origin, the community in which I grew up, the culture or religion to which I was exposed) shaped my perspectives and worldview and my attitudes about people different from myself. If these attitudes remain unexamined, they can form the basis for unconscious bias and the prejudices that so often follows.

One way to understand Einstein's call for the widening of our circles is to embrace the practice of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking requires us to become aware of the lenses through which we see the world and through which the world is interpreted by us. Those of us who wear glasses or contacts understand all too well the impact of lenses on our vision. In this same way, the experiences of our lives form lenses through which we see and interpret the world. If we are unaware of our lenses, if we believe that our view is objective, that ours is the only truth, then we are living like the people of the wells, living in the prison that Einstein described, a prison of our own arrogance and lack of self awareness. The work of building a new global commons invites us to begin in a place of radical humility in which we understand our particular perspectives as unique and valuable, but also as limited and partial.

In working in classrooms, in workplaces and in communities across the world around issues of multicultural perspective-taking, I use a very simple exercise, a very low tech exercise, that illustrates this phenomenon and its relationship to identity and worldview. I invite participants to sit together in a circle. In the middle of the circle I place a box. The box that has symbols and 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 perspective-taking. 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, "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 perspective-taking 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 perspective-taking are clear. As human beings our perspectives, shaped by our life experiences, are both unique (and uniquely valuable) and limited (restricted by the lenses of our experience.)

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 - or 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. Also, 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.

But the box exercise reveals that diversity is a resource to a more complete understanding of the world, or a resource for a problem to be solved, or a resource a team that works together collaboratively, or of a community that lives together in harmony. It reveals that a diversity of perspectives is necessary to solving complex problems, whether they be scientific, technological, business, interpersonal, political 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 across a desert, and that the only way to build a clearer understanding of the box, or the problem, or the world, 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 and the cultural contexts in which they were formed, we also reach below the surface of our lives, and touch the oceanic life force that flows through all of us, and throughout the world in which we live and move and have our being, connecting us to one another in an inextricable web of interdependence.

In my work, I have the unbelievable blessing of sitting in circles of people of all traditions, all beliefs, all cultures, who are building powerful multicultural coalitions to take on the great challenges of their communities and of the world including in areas of economics, education, health, technology, conflict transformation, violence prevention, women's empowerment and youth leadership. The United Religions Initiative is a global network of grassroots people for whom diversity and inclusion is at the heart of building cultures of peace, justice and healing.

In closing, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to each of you, for your commitment to diversity and inclusion, for whatever your location in this work, you too are part of a global network of peacebuilders, justice-seekers, and community healers, for whom the diversity of human experience is a resource, not a barrier, to establishing the beloved community on this global commons in which we live.

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