



This is My Song is one of my favorite hymns. Not only because I love singing the Finlandia tune, but because the words, the call for peace, and the reminder that our humanity crosses boundaries of hearts and minds and lands. These messages are deeply resonant with the times in which we live. This month, as we return to who we are in worship, exploring our Unitarian Universalist values of transformation, pluralism, justice and equity, interdependence, generosity, and love.

We do so not based on the assumption that our way of being religious is the only or the best way. This is my home, the faith where my heart is. Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine, but other hearts in other lands and faiths are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine. In an attempt to bridge divides of religion, culture, and race, some say, "Oh, we're all the same deep down at our core," or perpetuate what we really must admit is a lie by insisting, "I don't see difference."

The truth is not all people and not all religions are the same. When we pretend that they are, we avoid the deeper, more challenging work of actually engaging with different cultures, identities, and theologies. Seeking to understand what they mean to others, reflecting on what challenges us about them and what we can learn from them that helps us understand not only them, but also ourselves more fully. This is the work of pluralism.

One of the gifts of my upbringing as a Unitarian Universalist and one of the gifts that we give our young people in this church is being raised to live and flourish in a pluralistic world. It's hard to navigate the complexities when you think that your beliefs, your way of living and praying and being in the world is the right way and others are wrong. We've seen this play out just this week.

Some of the most powerful people in this country are labeling, publicly labeling citizens domestic terrorists, not for anything they've done or actions they've taken, but for existing and for believing that all people are our neighbors and deserve to be treated humanely, justly, and with dignity. When people who approach life thinking they are right encounter others who are different and can't just dismiss or move past the situation, it threatens their sense of self.

Whereas young people raised to live and flourish in a pluralistic world are more likely to encounter difference with curiosity and openness, with a desire to better understand others and oneself. This is why I chose to attend the seminaries that I did. Having grown up Unitarian Universalist, I needed to be surrounded by religious diversity and not just other progressives, but a much broader religious diversity in order to better understand my own faith and navigate how that relates to others.

I prepared for ministry alongside Christians of all kinds from our close cousins, the United Church of Christ, to Pentecostals, with Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews, with Muslims and Buddhists, with Wiccan and pagans, with people who had found God through 12-step programs and in prison, with people who had survived religious trauma and those who were so solid in their belief in the inerrant word of God that the Bible classes they took in seminary caused a crisis of faith.

Have you ever engaged pluralism like this? Not glossing over difference, but allowing it to change you? By learning about and experiencing how others pray, I came to understand the role of prayer in my spiritual life. By encountering Christians from a variety of races and cultures, I came to understand how race and culture profoundly shape the ways people practice their religion and reflected on how my whiteness and European ancestry shapes who I am as a person of faith.

By getting to know people whose religion was infused in their family lives and who invited me into some of those rituals, I came to see how Unitarian Universalism shapes me day today and how I can live my faith fully beyond the time that we spend here in church. By eating with people of other religions, I came to understand the importance of food in reinforcing identity and building community.

By encountering religious communities who are not as open to women in leadership or LGBTQ people, I came to appreciate my own Unitarian Universalist community and the sense of belonging that I had taken for granted, newly committed to creating that feeling of belonging for others. What I didn't do is pick and choose things that I liked from other religions and take them as my own, treating religious diversity as a buffet from which I can choose and devour the tastiest morsels.

In the poem we heard earlier, Julian Jamaica Soto says, "You are not a kudzu vine, eating entire hillsides for the purpose of feeding your own lush life." Unitarian universalism is sometimes mistaken as a buffet, a religion that's not really a religion of its own but a community of people who take bits and pieces and practices from other religions to create one for themselves.

Soto warns against this misconception. "You must know instead," they wrote, "that inside you our entire universes, milky blue, magenta, and gold, expanding. But to actually be free, free, you must know and you must fight for the entire universes inside of everyone else. Being free is not a license, but a promise."

The supposed freedom of the religious buffet is not really religious freedom. It's not real religious freedom or liberation. In the creation and recreation of our individual religious identities, we have to go beyond the buffet, returning to who we are to the deeply rooted Unitarian universalist commitment to pluralism and religious freedom.

Going way back to the year 1568 in the city of Turda, part of what is now Romania, King John Sigismund established an edict allowing congregations to choose their own preachers. Now, this was a time when Catholicism and Protestantism were battling it out across Europe, so such a bold declaration of religious freedom and tolerance was unprecedented. The King, the first and only Unitarian king in the history of the world, made this edict at the urging of his Unitarian court physician, Giorgio Biandrata and his Unitarian court preacher, Ferenc Dávid.

In the centuries that followed in Europe and then in the United States, Unitarians came to emphasize covenant rather than creed, explored non-Christian scriptural and spiritual wisdom, notably teaching world religions courses in seminaries as early as 1848, and were catalysts for interfaith cooperation. Today, we lift up the value of pluralism with these words in our Unitarian Universalist Association's own bylaws, which say, "We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology."

As such, we turn to many sources, the world, human experience, and other religions as sources of our evolving theological perspective. We declare that there are many paths to the sacred and that no one religion holds all the truth for all time. Because this is so, we believe that free, open and respectful dialogue is one of the primary ways that our theological perspectives evolve and grow.

Now, all jokes about church potlucks aside. I believe that the kind of pluralism that we value takes the form not of a buffet, but of a potluck, served family style. Everyone brings a dish and we all share in it. Everyone brings to the table something of themselves and makes this community what it is. Eboo Patel, a leader in the world of interfaith cooperation says, "If people don't bring an offering, the potluck doesn't exist. If everyone brings the same thing, it is boring."

What a nightmare it would be if you brought your best dish and you were met at the door with a giant machine that melted it down into the same bland goo as everyone else's best dish. The whole point of a potluck, he says, is the diversity of dishes. Potlucks cultivate in people the importance not just of the individual parts and the connections between them, but the health of the whole. Welcome to the potluck, friends. What have you brought to share? It's not a matter of means or resources or cooking ability. Everyone brings something.

The difference between diversity and pluralism is that diversity exists, but pluralism engages. It's an approach to community that acknowledges the joy and sometimes the discomfort of not being the only person at the table. That is true welcome. As Jim Forbes, preacher and interfaith leader who had a long career of ministry at Riverside Church in New York City taught, any truly pluralistic church is one where you can count on resonating with maybe 75% of the worship service. The other 25% is your gift to your neighbor.

Being a pluralistic faith means acknowledging that no one of us, nor Unitarian Universalism as a whole, is at the center. This informs how we relate to others, both within our community and beyond. There's a lot of recent movement in our society to put certain beliefs, theologies, and identities at the center. Take, for example, the mandate that public school educators post the Ten Commandments in their classrooms.

I've received numerous distressed emails from parents and educators alike in our church, asking what they can do to counter Christian hegemony in the classrooms, where they are charged to teach the future leaders of our country or where they are entrusting their children to teachers to do so. It gives me hope to see the ways that you are resisting this mandate.

Some are posting the religious statements and values of other religions represented among the student body, including the principles and values of Unitarian Universalism alongside the 10 Commandments. Others, like church member Katie Besser, are joining class action lawsuits to stop public school districts in Texas from being required to post the 10 Commandments. Yes. Yes. We do this because religious diversity and pluralism is what makes our schools, our communities, our country, and our church strong.

Our church, First Unitarian Church of Dallas, was founded through an act of welcoming pluralism. Temple Emanuel welcomed a fledgling group of Unitarians into their space to worship and form a church in 1899, an acknowledgement that despite our differences, we are stronger together. Years later, we went on to open our doors here to Muslims in Dallas who were looking for a space to pray and who grew to become one of the largest mosques in the country.

We opened our doors to gay Catholics seeking to participate in the sacrament of communion. We opened our doors to a community of LGBTQ Christians who went on to form the Cathedral of Hope. We are stronger together, and we have continued to partner with these groups through efforts like Friends for Good, Dallas Area Interfaith, Thanks-Giving Square, Faith Commons, and other interfaith justice efforts.

As Forrest Church wrote in *The Cathedral of the World* from which our first reading comes, "Because the cathedral is so vast, our time so short and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage, we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the cathedral. Yet by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning. We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden. The light is veiled. Yet being halfway in size between the creation itself and the body's smallest constituent part that we can encompass with our minds, the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder. Awakened by the light, we stand in the cathedral trembling with awe."

While some may tremble with fear at what religious pluralism means for their sense of certainty and comfort, let us tremble with awe at what it means for the whole. This is our work, beloved church, to be changed by engaging with others, to cherish that 75% of what resonates with us and to gift the other 25% to our neighbor, to gather with sacred beings of diverse cultures, experiences, and

theologies around the table, curious about what each of us brings and open to the ways that we will create community together, and to look up at the windows, each one telling a story with the way the light shines through, and to reflect with awe at how the Cathedral of the World, as ancient as time, stands strong to this day.

Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine, but other hearts and other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine. Let us do our part to strengthen it for the generations to come. May it be so and amen.