

What Divides Us? The Uneasy Peace with Class in America
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The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Lighting of the Diya/Chalice

You will notice this morning that our chalice looks a little different. This is a brass lamp, from India, and we have it today in honor of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights that took place this past week. Normally, the lamp, called a diya, would be filled with oil, and camphor wicks would be lit in it, but it's a bit too much of a fire hazard for us, so we are using our safe votives instead.

In the Hindu tradition, Diwali is a time to honor the triumph of good over evil, a time to phase out the fall and invite winter in; a time to honor and invite into our homes and those of others the goddess Lakshmi, who brings abundance, wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual.

And so we light this chalice in honor of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights. Please say the words printed in your order of service with me:

*May the wisdom from the world's religions inspire us
in our ethical and spiritual lives
and may the lighting of this diya
bring abundance to all beings.*

Reading from

“Elite: Uncovering Classicism in Unitarian Universalist History”

by Mark Harris:

Many of us carry around class stereotypes about who belongs in Unitarian Universalist congregations – and we have all heard anecdotes. In May 2006 I was in Syracuse, N.Y., for a meeting of the St. Lawrence Foundation Board. This board gives out grants annually to theological schools and students. As we were leaving the meeting, I strolled toward my car, chatting with another member of the board. He surveyed the parking lot and said, “It looks like there are a lot of Prius cars here. That must mean there are quite a few UUs staying at our hotel.” He then pointed out the location of his own Subaru, but went on to say, “We once had a truck, and we drove into a UU parking lot. That was not good.”

This reminds me of a story my wife, Andrea, a multigenerational UU, tells about one of her brothers who went to church in Northampton, Mass., for a while. Brian told the person he was talking to at social hour that he was a carpenter. The person automatically assumed Brian was not college-educated ... and then directly asked him why he would ever come to a Unitarian

Universalist church, since he was obviously not the right type of person. The person never learned that Brian grew up and has a sister, brother-in-law, cousin, and an uncle who are UU ministers.

These assorted stories carry the assumption that a liberal thinking person's faith will not appeal to those who are not college-educated, work with their hands, drive pickup trucks, or live more than 20 miles from an art museum. In fact, these assumptions may simply be untrue. [Vanessa's aside: *I find it funny that the author says "may" be untrue.*] ...

Charles Vickery was a ... minister who came from a middle-class family from Pittsfield, Maine ... He once said,

A church which has any trace of class or racial segregation ... should be destroyed. It has not the answer for our time. It kills man, rather than helping him grow.

Sermon:

Interesting that my sermon on class happens to coincide with the end of a major Hindu holiday, and one that celebrates a goddess, Lakshmi, known for bringing with her prosperity. The irony, then, is double: both that we humans always hope prosperity is headed our way and think the chance is as good as the next guy's, and that the holiday comes from a tradition that we know also has, as part of its heritage, a notion of caste – a complicated system of divisions among people based on many things including inherited occupation and status.

Americans often react strongly to the notion of caste when it is brought up. The idea of inherited status, binding and final, is hard for most Americans to swallow. It violates our sense of fairness and merit. Even early European Christians who brought their faith to India made it clear, as part of their offering to the subcontinent, that converts would enter a community where caste no longer held sway. As an aside: The truth is that families from high caste found a way to remember and recall their descendants to their original caste origins, even as they officially gave up rights to such distinctions.

So all that stuff persists, dies hard, shows up in myriad ways. Why?

We human beings seem to like divisions between us – dividing lines of all kinds. The constructs of race, of tribe, of nation, of faith are all such dividing lines. And the age-old division of folks based on wealth and status is but another. When you throw in a few secret passwords and handshakes, habits and rituals and favoring of your "in crowd" over that "out crowd," you have boundaries more firmly in place. Such divisions are part of the human story.

It is why, I think, if you read about how class plays out in America, it is such a conflicted and conflicting subject. We like our divisions *and* we are embarrassed by them. In this country, nowhere is that more clearly the case than around the class divide.

Class, after all, plays against another piece of the American story. It plays counter to the piece of our narrative that says we are all *one* nation under God, “We the People.” It plays against the piece that tells of our founding forefathers and foremothers fleeing monarchy and nobility and the unfair hold that inherited place had on the reins of power in their European homelands. African-Americans who came via slave trade or are descended from such never bought that class was absent from our country. Or caste, for that matter. But for those who bought the story of a democracy built on equal rights, the uneven playing field of class creates, at best, cognitive dissonance.

Divisions and hierarchy play hard against the myth of the radical equality of our citizens. It is a tension with which we live. Up until now, part of how we lived with it was to say that present class didn’t *determine* future standing. However, that is less and less true in our country. The truth is that right now there is *more class mobility* in the lands of queens and kings and former monarchs – countries like England and France – and even in our earnest neighbor Canada, than in our nation. The truth is that the divide in our democracy is widening between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Moreover, the danger of the divide is not so much that being poor in America doesn’t confer certain benefits and choices, but that unlike England, France, Canada, Scandinavia and a host of other great peers, being poor here confers *huge disadvantages*.

Wealth equals health, someone said to my husband recently. Telling this to my father, he remarked that just last weekend, while in Richmond, Va., and reading the obituary pages, he had remarked to his host, “Is it just my imagination or do your black citizens die a lot younger than your white ones?” Black men, he said, were dying at 57, at 63, while white men were regularly dying in their 80s. It wasn’t his imagination. Published data have the difference in life expectancy between the poorest and wealthiest in our nation at over a 10-year divide.

Being poor in American is quite simply a death sentence. Moreover, the crisis in education that everyone is worried about is a bigger crisis for those for whom the schools are the only way up – as the founders of our nation knew schools and education would be. Just this week, in a study released Thursday by Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation of Germany, it was revealed that 1 in 5 children in the U.S. are poor and 1 in 5 senior citizens. Slovakia’s rates are half that. Among all our peers in developed countries (the OECD), we make the bottom five to bottom 10 of every list in all categories including poverty rates, investment in pre-primary education, health care for the poor. We barely beat out only Greece, Chile, Mexico and Turkey.

So it would seem it is time for some radical redistribution of wealth in order to better serve our more central national priorities. But paving the way for that may mean dismantling some of our hang-ups around class.

I was at a study group recently where we discussed with UU minister Mark Harris his recent book about the history of class and our own Unitarian and Universalist religious movements. It appears we tended to be radically egalitarian folks, but then the Unitarians in particular became the power base once arriving here in the U.S. and started tending more to the establishment and wealthy.

We have our own class issues to face. The way we tend to skew to the educated, and as the educated tend to be the better off, skew that way too. As Harris points out in the reading I shared, we often assume college educations among our people. Do a double-take when a truck parks in the lot normally filled with Priuses. We have our own hidden barriers to inclusion in our inclusive. I scheduled this sermon, in fact, because one of our new members raised the issue of how elitist she felt we were or tended to be. It was a feeling. Some assumptions that were made. Sometimes – we all know the experience – you know you aren't entirely welcome, but cannot put your finger on why or how that is.

I'd like for us to talk and pay attention to how we communicate something other than welcome. And this was to begin to invite that.

But what came up at this study group that was most remarkable is how no one eagerly claimed to be anything other than firmly middle-class, though by inherited wealth, sound savings and investment or solid household earnings, many were above the threshold. We talked about how no one we know actually readily admits to being more than middle-class, even those who were firmly launched outside those bounds. Is it shame about privilege? Is it a false sense of what threshold makes us rich in our nation? One commentary I read said that Americans were mistakenly associating "rich" with the "super rich" we hear and read about and under-evaluating our status and privilege. In other words, instead of feeling lucky, many of us convince ourselves we are comfortable but not rich, or okay but not comfortable. My worry is that with that deflated sense of how well off we are compared to others, we also lose all compulsion to give back.

Surely it is not just the 1 percent the Occupy movement is talking about who will feel the pinch of a redistribution of wealth – at least not the depth of redistribution we will need to be a nation that does right by its people. I imagine most everyone will have to give up something – even if it is only the possibility of the unchecked accumulation of wealth.

The promise we would get in exchange for giving up whatever we would be asked to give up would be that this effort would bring us closer together. Maybe even literally.

One of the trends that sociologists have observed is the increasing isolation of the wealthy. Those well off are increasingly moving to exurbs or gated communities. They are socializing in tighter and safer and more homogenous circles, more cut off from those who aren't in their class.

Frankly, all classes probably run that risk in less dramatic ways. We like to move with our pack, interact with those similar to us who pose the fewest challenges, be with those who allow us to speak the most natural language. And in this case, be with those who don't force us to confront how we are more or less privileged.

However, once we notice that pattern, we have to see how it stunts us. Isolating, we miss the message that our neighbor is everyone. It violates our faith commitments, too. Unitarians and Universalists were people who always preached, whether we practiced it perfectly or not, the "unity of all" (divisions be damned) and "no one left behind" (in heaven or here on Earth). Mutual care and accountability were our command and our salvation.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberation theologian, must have been thinking of all these human divisions and how easily we fall into them when he wrote:

Neighbor is not he or she whom I find in my path but rather he or she in whose path I place myself. He or she whom I approach and actively seek.

Breaking the habit of dividing ourselves, and staying safely in our micro communities of economic sameness, is part of the challenge classism poses for us. So does it pose the challenge of letting go of shame about not having material wealth at the level you dreamed, or having surpassed what you once only dreamed possible. Remembering that material wealth is just stuff and money, not heart and worth, is part of our spiritual work, as is reminding ourselves that how we employ what we are given is the real test in life.

Original sin, if ever there were one, is the sin of letting anything tear us apart from one another.

What does all this mean practically? Actually, it seems to overlay some of what the Occupy movement is asking for. It could mean:

- Making politicians answerable to all the people, not just corporations or the wealthy. (Is that through complete public financing of all elections? Perhaps.)
- Putting people first in evaluating our priorities around education, health and other key areas of shared life.
- The redistribution of wealth, if necessary, to fund those basics well.
- Creating more middle-class jobs.

And the spiritual work of:

- Not clinging to false myths about wealth as a sign of greater value (holiness),
- Or accumulation of status as a right without responsibilities or limits.
- Reaching across difference so we break down the divides that creep in too easily.
- Reclaiming a sense of ourselves as one people, one nation, indivisible, with care and opportunity for all.

May Lakshmi, who brings abundance, wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual, find her way into all our homes.