

## **BYID: Bring Your Identity**

*Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel, Intern Minister*

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

3 March, 2013

N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer—and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

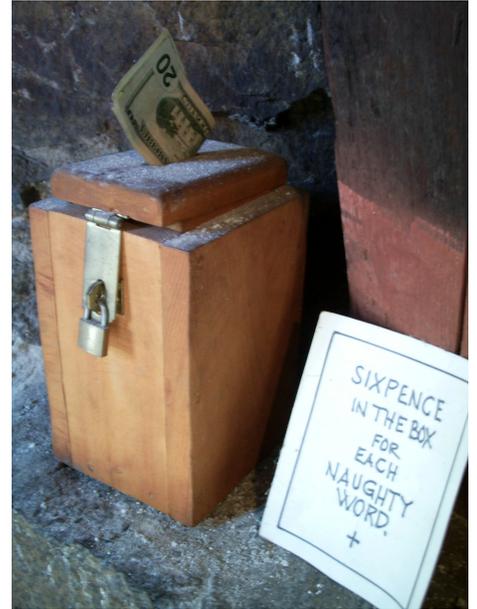
The notice on a screen reads: “Warning: the following program contains scenes of nudity, sexuality, violence, and coarse language”; the four horsemen of the TVpocalypse, it seems. Once in a while, they’ll give a much vaguer description: “mature themes” or “adult situations.”

These are indeed the kind of themes that require a certain degree of maturity to discuss, though I’m not sure it is only adults who need a fuller awareness of the complex realities involved with living in a society such as ours and in treating each other with respect. It seems to me that a better understanding in some of these adult situations can only be reached by directly approaching some taboo matters and dealing head-on with whatever is behind some brands of coarse language. To be sure, these matters often need to be handled delicately—discretion is advised.

And with good reason; these being the kinds of things that make people uncomfortable, and discomfort can have powerful effects.

Let’s begin with nudity: one of my first encounters with Toronto—as I was preparing for this internship—included an unexpected amount of it. As I was making my way across Yonge street, I was suddenly prevented from crossing by scores of naked bike riders. As I understand it, this is a group that feels that such bold move would draw attention to the issue of global warming... and attention it drew.

At the time, I was on my way to meeting the minister. And I began to wonder how I would explain my unexpected delay. Somehow, I suspected that saying “a band of naked bikers blocked me from crossing Yonge Street” might seem lacking credibility.



Indeed, my friends, sometimes bringing uncomfortable matters—and the language that comes with them—to light, and addressing it head-on, can go a long way in turning these themes from means of oppression into sources of empowerment.

In this congregation, and this country, we have seen drastic changes as queer communities have made an intentional effort to reclaim much of the language of shame and turn it into that which is its diametrical opposite: pride.

Other efforts have had different levels of success. From time to time, a group of women seeking to draw attention to the issue of re-victimization of recipients of sexual violence have staged “Slut-Walks”, seeking to make the statement that a woman who embraces and expresses her sexuality does not forfeit her right to deny—or give—consent.

The tactic has been controversial among feminists of different ages and genders. I have to say that, as a man, who does not often face the same intensity of fear and danger as many of my female contemporaries do, I sometimes feel... unqualified to give a credible opinion on this matter. But what is clear to me in this situation is that sexual violence, unwelcome aggression, toward anyone has no place in a mature society. And I admire the intention of being intentional about openly discussing the often uncomfortable matters of sexuality, violence, and coarse language.

Today we discuss these matters because we have made a commitment to be intentionally inclusive, and this intention includes a concrete pledge to recognize the dignity and worth of our diverse communities. This recognition involves more than offering the message that we are welcoming, but an intense amount of work in questioning what it means to be welcoming to diversity.

Indeed, for a long time we have fancied ourselves a diverse community... and often enough we are right. We have made many efforts to be intentionally inclusive of various religious and spiritual backgrounds, socio-economic conditions, sexual orientations and gender identities, and we seek to promote a sense of equality regardless of skin colour, language, or place of origin. A good deal of the time, these efforts are palpable. At other times, when we look around our sanctuary, we might wonder: who isn't here? and why might they not feel included if they were here?

As I have been part of this Unitarian Universalist tradition for several years, I have learned many lessons on diversity and on being intentionally welcoming, but perhaps some of my more vivid lessons in diversity happened in seminary... an ecumenical Christian seminary, in fact, where I rubbed shoulders with United Church

folk, Anglicans of various theological and social views, and Presbyterians of different flavours; and I often felt that their diverse makeup would almost seem to make some of our own debates look like a Mickey Mouse fan club meeting.

It was refreshing to see these fellow faithful discuss and—more intriguingly—*struggle* with heavy questions as their traditions, contemporary realities, and the search for truth, highlighted the differences between these denominations, and among the individual members within each of these. I saw colleagues who openly embraced different sexual identities and those who were more reserved in their opinion about this were hard-pressed to give harsh words to their colleagues in faith. I was further heartened by the prevalent respect that my colleagues usually gave to each other when expressing differences of theological or social opinion, dealing with each other in what they would call Christian love and understanding.

I remember a particularly intriguing moment toward the end of our degree, as the combined cohort of this inter-denominational seminary planned to get together to celebrate as *one* school in an ecumenical worship service led by us: the combined students of the Montreal School of Theology.

Five of us were convened into, well... a committee to organize the service so that it might reflect the theological diversity of our school. And it was indeed a diverse committee.

Between the five of us, we represented four different denominations, and at least as many languages; we spanned four decades in the life spectrum and a wide breadth of skin tones; we comprised three different sexual orientations, and at least two genders.

We had become used to working well together, though we started to notice some complications when it came time to draw up the liturgy.

Who's going to say the prayer of approach? someone asked.

The prayer of wha...? wondered someone else.

After having shared those seminary years together, we were only then beginning to appreciate that yes, we are different denominations, and we can have different styles of worship.

Even more admirable was our drive to figure out a way to worship together, and we eventually worked things out: we ended up using a hybrid hymn, combining lyrics from “Be Thou My Vision” from the United Church’s *Voices United* hymnal and “Wake, Now, My Senses” from our own *Singing the Living Tradition*. The communion bread was properly consubstantiated in the presence of our Anglican priest professor, and the musical accompaniment featured the Presbyterian Chapel’s organ and some saw music, with a guest appearance by Chantal, the amazing singing saw.

But one of my most striking lessons in diversity came not from admiring the diversity before me, but from getting to a deeper understanding about my own identity amid others. And this happened in an odd moment, one where I had thought that I had reached a comfortable level of understanding, but was brusquely made aware of lingering blind spots in my perspective, with a jarring realization of who I was in that company of my peers.

At some point in the committee's preparation I had made a suggestion... the details of which escape me now and have limited importance, other than to say that, whatever its merits may have been, I sensed that the rest of my colleagues were not on board with it. Something about their hesitation told me that while they respected my suggestion, they were not thrilled with it, yet they went along: *sure*, they assured me, *we could do that*.

Not keen on fighting other people's fights for them, I took their response at face value and we kept on with the plan, as I had proposed it... until later that evening, when I got home and read an e-mail from my classmate:

*Rod*—began my colleague—*the remainder of us got together bit by bit and began to actually voice preferences for the service*—she explained—and *the consensus among the four women is...* to go a different route.



My first reaction was befuddlement that a group that had made a decision would just change it so dramatically in my absence. And then that phrase jumped out at me: “the consensus among the four women”. Amid my excitement at the diversity in our team—including the active leadership of women in ministry—it had not occurred to me that, with the rest of the committee being women, I was the only man. And then a shocking thought came to me: had my gender identity—my maleness—played a role in muting the voices of my teammates?

I followed up with my colleague. Yes, she said, the other women had felt, at some level, intimidated at the thought of contradicting me. Yes, she thinks gender had been a factor, and thanks for bringing it up, she continued, the rest of them might not had felt comfortable pointing it out.

Still a bit dumbfounded by this previously-hidden force, I asked another colleague. Rod, she expressed to me, this may have been because you're a man, and maybe it's also that we are women. She went on to explain the social conditioning about her gender roles, and how they still play a daily part of her life. And that just because I might not be directly responsible for the rest of society's doing, does not

mean that I am not responsible for what roles I might continue to play in my gender identity.

To this day I still find myself considering how different aspects of group dynamics may have factored into this whole situation, including attributes of groupthink, personal shyness, or plain sober second thought. The precise proportion of gender as a force remains a bit mysterious to me. What is clear to me is that I can no longer afford to be gender blind in dealing with any group of people. That the moment I walk into a room, someone might be thinking: there is a man; there is a white man; there is straight white man. And for some of you, there might be the consideration that there is a straight white man, in a black robe speaking from a pulpit.

Some of these identities can be helped, and others much less so. I do not feel the need to be ashamed for my maleness, my whiteness, or my straight identities. And I usually feel justified in my choice of ecclesial attire.

Yet I know that somewhere there is someone to whom, rightly or wrongly, these identities hold a deep meaning, perhaps a particularly painful meaning, that might taint our interaction in ways neither one of us might fully understand. But in recognizing my own identities first, in relation to those of others, I might have taken one more step toward better understanding with all who make a part of my life and life's work; and to develop a keener sensibility—discretion—in looking to see what their story means to these interactions.

Gender blindness, colour blindness, identity blindness: these strategies may have offered one step out of the constraints that the coarse language of hate forced on oppressed groups, but I believe that a further step now beckons us to see, and name, our identities with a new maturity, so that when our children grow up, their adult situations may be free of violence; that coarse language may remain in the realm of toe-stubbings and cathartic incantations, not a means of bashing someone else down; that sexuality may be in the realm of healthy lives and healthy discussion.

That in coming to terms with some of the meanings of some of our identities, the tags that sometimes come with us may be less the oppressive labels for shaming or aggression, and rather badges of honour; simple distinctions about the diverse kinds of people that we are; ways of recognizing the different life paths and family histories that make our different journeys; and names that break a spell of captivity and reshape it into a blessing of empowerment.

So may it be,  
Alleluia.  
Amen.