



# EXPLORATION

## Pluralism

### Readings



#### 1. *Who are we?*

by Rev. William G. Sinkford

Who are we? Can we know and share that with one another? What do we bring to the issues of justice making? What impels us to this work and will support us in the areas where we do not want to go?

Forrest Church ...says: "We Unitarian Universalists have inherited a magnificent theological legacy. In a sweeping answer to creeds that divide the human family, Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from one source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.

"Given our commitment to pluralism, UUism should represent the perfect laboratory for modeling amity in a world rife with passions that stem from differences of belief. Too often, however, we muster more passion for that which divides than we do for all that unites us.

"Everything (I say) has implications for our commitment to justice. Unless we put it into practice, Universalism (and Unitarian Universalism) is frivolous, self-denying, and moot."

I know this faith community I love has Good News—our religious pluralism in a world in which religious difference leads to war—we live it every week.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/20511.shtml>

#### 2. *Part of Each Other*

by William Sloane Coffin

The challenge, then, is to recognize

that the world is about two things: differentiation and communion. The challenge is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity, to unite the particular with the universal, to recognize the need for roots while insisting that the point of roots is to put forth branches. What is intolerable is for differences to become idolatrous. No human being's identity is exhausted by his or her gender, race, ethnic origin, national loyalty, or sexual orientation. All human beings have more in common than they have in conflict, and it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems over-riding that what they have in common needs most to be affirmed. James Baldwin described us well: "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other."

Source: *The Heart Is a Little to the Left* by William Sloane Coffin

#### 3. *Welcoming Diversity*

by Jay McDaniel

There are at least two ways to welcome diversity. One is to personally get to know people of other religions, spending time with them and working together to help build local communities that are just, sustainable, and peaceful.... The second way to welcome diversity is to undertake critical, yet friendly, readings of the other religions — even if we do not know people who belong to them — with an interest in appreciating the wisdom those religions might offer us. . . . To get to know people of other religions and to undertake friendly readings of their traditions is akin to lighting a candle that helps brighten our small corner of the world, helping to dispel the blindness that permeates the region. When the small candle is combined with other candles in other parts of the world, it can provide hope for a world too often torn apart by fear, hatred, and

confusion. There is a great need in our world for this kind of candle lighting."

Source: *Gandhi's Hope* by Jay McDaniel

#### 4. *For religion to be significant* by Rev. Marco Belletini

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also had to provide opportunities for deepening, for what I call spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel-good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work....

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/for-religion-to-be-significant>

#### 5. *The Four Pillars of Pluralism* by Diana L. Eck

First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. . . . Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.

Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require [us] ...to know anything about one



another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.

Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree.... Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table—with one’s commitments.

Source: no longer online

## 6. *Unity, Diversity, Self-Identity* by Rev. Emmy Lou Belcher

...The issue is not about whether we all believe the same but whether we can respect differing searches for truth. Unitarian Universalism is not a club for political liberals. It is not a club for those who think one way about religious questions and not another.

It is, instead, an experiment in pluralism, an on-going struggle to live with those who believe differently but hold a common value—that all people are ...called to account for what they do, not for what they believe.

...Dr. Eboo Patel...founded an institution to research and teach living in a religiously pluralistic world...

To successfully forge a culture of pluralistic inclusion, ...human beings have to first know themselves, then appreciate the commonalities they have with others. ...Patel is a Muslim, and one of his favorite passages in the Qur’an has God saying: “I created you into diverse nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.” When Dr. Patel works with a group of youth or young adults, he asks them to begin by telling one of the sayings of their religious tradition of which they are proud. ...They find themselves in more agreement than disagreement.

The goal of a pluralistic society is not for people to think alike, but for them to shape a good world from within their mutual values. Recognition of pluralism requires ...humility—none of us is complete in our own uniqueness. We need each other. The good life requires unity in diversity and diversity in its unity.

Source: no longer online

## 7. *Predisposed* by Anne Applebaum

More recently, Karen Stenner, a behavioral economist who began researching personality traits two decades ago, has argued that about a third of the population in any country has what she calls an authoritarian predisposition, a word that is more useful than personality, because it is less rigid. An authoritarian predisposition, one that favors homogeneity and order, can be present without necessarily manifesting itself; its opposite, a “libertarian” predisposition, one that favors diversity and difference, can be silently present too. Stenner’s definition of authoritarianism isn’t political, and it isn’t the same thing as conservatism. Authoritarianism appeals, simply, to people who cannot tolerate complexity: there is nothing intrinsically “left-wing” or “right-wing” about this instinct at all. It is anti-pluralist. It is suspicious of people with different ideas. It is allergic to fierce debates. Whether those who have it ultimately derive their politics from Marxism or nationalism is irrelevant. It is a frame of mind, not a set of ideas.

Source: *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* by Anne Applebaum

# Wisdom Story

## *Indra’s Jeweled Net*

Adapted from “Indra’s Magnificent Jeweled Net”  
Mary K. Isaac in *Families: Weave a Tapestry of Faith* (UUA, Fall 2010)

Imagine, if you will, a great net, spun with delicate intricacy, adorned with lovely jewels, and stretching out in all directions. This is the magnificent net of the great god Indra. Let us look upon it, and wonder.

Indra’s net is like a spider’s web in intricacy and loveliness, but this is no ordinary weaving for it spans the infinity of time and space. At each place where the threads of the net connect to one another, a single glittering jewel has been hung; and since the net is infinite in dimension, there are an infinite number of jewels, too. They stretch out across the vastness of existence, suspended in and supported by the net, catching the light and twinkling like the stars. It is a beautiful sight to behold.

Imagine selecting one of the jewels for a closer look. Perhaps it catches your eye with its color, its luster. As you inspect this particular jewel, you notice first its cut and polished surfaces, the source of its glittering. But then you see: in the jewel’s surfaces you see reflected the other jewels of this net—and not just a few, but all of the other jewels in their infinite array. Each jewel in Indra’s net is reflected in every other jewel, an infinite process of reflection.

Now each sparkling jewel is a being: a human, a plant, an animal—even a lowly worm. Each is connected to every other in an interdependent web of all existence. Each of us is there, reflecting and influencing one another. A change in one jewel—in one being, in one person—will result in a change, however slight, in every other. Everything affects everything else.

Pull back now and see more of Indra’s net again. See how ripples of glittering light pass across the net. Think about what you might be sending out across the web of all existence. After all, when we harm even a single strand of the net, we harm the entire web. In the same way, though, every single helpful action will send positive ripples

throughout the infinite net, touching every jewel, every being, every life.

Source: Touchstones

## Snippets

“Through the years I have found my own faith, not threatened, but broadened and deepened by the study of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh traditions of faith. And I have found that only as a Christian pluralist could I be faithful to the mystery and the presence of the one I call God. Being a Christian pluralist means daring to encounter people of very different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders, but by its roots.” *Diana Eck*

“At the heart of creativity is diversity. Diversity is at the core of the universe and is its art form. We need to embrace and appreciate the differences in places and people. However, creativity and diversity have not been espoused by the bureaucratic structures of our dominant culture. Schools, governments, and corporations prefer predictable, managed behavior. In the creative process, we surrender and often become astonished at what happens as we revere the diversity of ethos, language, history, and place. As we challenge the conformity that leads to boredom and burnout, the door opens to joy, inspiration, and healing.” *James Conlon*

“I am a poor sort of shaman. My shape never changes, except, year by year, to wrinkle and sag. I did not become an otter, even for an instant. But the yearning to leap across the distance, the reaching out in imagination to a fellow creature, seems to me a worthy impulse, perhaps the most encouraging and distinctive one we have. It is the same impulse that moves us to reach out to one another across differences of race or gender, age or class.”  
*Scott Russell Sanders*

“The middle path makes me wary.... But in the middle of my life, I am coming to see the middle path as a walk with wisdom where conversations of complexity can be found, that the middle path is the path of move-

ment.... Life is not so predictable. I am forced to listen more carefully. In the right and left worlds, the stories told are largely set, there much to defend at the expense of the other, rhetoric is charged with certitude; it's safer here, we are sure we are correct. We become missionaries for a position, yes, exactly, no doubt about it, practitioners of the missionary position. Variety is lost. Diversity is lost. Creativity is lost in our inability to make love with the world.”

*Terry Tempest Williams*

“Tolerance, however desirable and necessary, does not inevitably lead to understanding the other; it merely permits people to live alongside those who differ from them without demeaning them. Neither does tolerance require that they learn anything from the other. Pluralism, in contrast, demands pursuing understanding.... In distinction from relativism and syncretism, pluralism is built upon an encounter of commitments and a respect for difference that comes from extensive knowledge of one's tradition.”

*Mary Boys and Sara Lee*

“To know only one religion is to know none at all. The stories, devotions and sacred places of an unknown faith bring a richness and depth to our own beliefs. In the realm of the spirit, each tradition enhances the others. Unfortunately, many think of religions as exclusive organizations and systems of belief. We talk about ecumenism but we don't take the next step to experience how a variety of religions can contribute to a full, complex spiritual life. The ancient Greeks sent observers to neighboring lands to study the ways of other spiritual communities and find ideas for their own practice. Perhaps it's time for us to do something similar and move forward from tolerance to reverence.”

*Ray Rierger*

“As we have noted earlier, the concept ‘diversity’ —the confluence of many hearths in one great place — is itself fully compatible with and is indeed a major defining characteristic of cosmos. Cosmopolites and cosmopolitans welcome pluralism, fearing it only when it threatens to become anarchic and destroy the very idea of cosmos—the no-



tion that human beings have important common experiences, that in view of these experiences and in view, further, of the powers of the imagination, it is entirely possible for one person to stand in the shoes of another, for one people to understand and appreciate the worldview of others.” *Yi-Fu Tuan*

“If we embrace the promise of diversity, of creative conflict, and of ‘losing’ in order to ‘win,’ we still face one final fear—the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives. This is not paranoia: the world is really out to get us! Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives—and that is the most daunting threat of all.” *Parker Palmer*

“This old man, Running Elk, was a believer in all religions. He participated in the old traditions of his people and was a member of several Christian churches. He prayed to Mecca every day and also practiced several Buddhist meditations. Running Elk was known to say, “I want to cover all the spiritual bases. Since you have to step on four different bases to hit a home run, I'm not going to take any chances with my spirituality.” He made certain he always practiced at least four different traditions faithfully, one from each direction of the world.”

*Bradford Keeney*

“There is no excuse now for simply dropping out of life. As long as we breathe, we have a responsibility for the cocreation of the world, for the good of the human race. Old age is not a free ride to irresponsibility. Now we must take our place among the sages of the world, comparing, evaluating, cajoling, and bringing experience to bear as have the elders of every generation before us. Now, too, we have a responsibility to





mentor the generations after us in the values and ideals that built a society based on equality, respect for others, and pluralism.” *Joan Chittister*

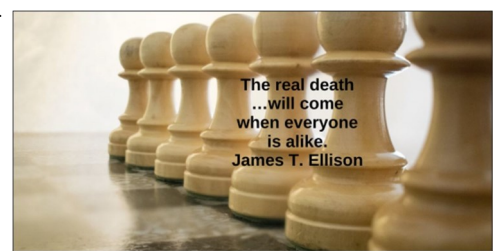
## Questions

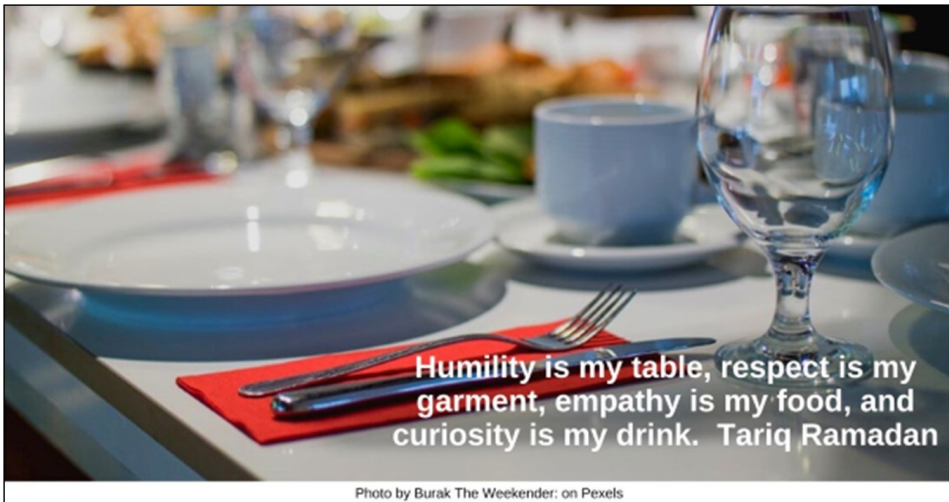
1. In reading #1, Rev. Bill Sinkford quotes Rev. Forrest Church, who wrote, “Given our commitment to pluralism, UUism should represent the perfect laboratory for modeling amity in a world rife with passions that stem from differences of belief.” Do you agree? What principles, values, and beliefs support this approach by Unitarian Universalists? Church was concerned that we focus more on “that which divides than we do for all that unites us.” Do you agree? Why or why not? With so much division and resentment, what is necessary to help us focus on the positive, on what we hold in common? Sinkford suggests that doing this is our “Good News.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How can a commitment to pluralism and skills to practice pluralism help in this endeavor?
2. In reading #2, William Sloane Coffin writes, “What is intolerable is for differences to become idolatrous.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Are White Supremacism and Christian Nationalism examples of idolatry? Why or why not? Are there other examples of similar idolatries? As an example, heteronormativity? Coffin insists, “All human beings have more in common than they have in conflict....” Do you agree? His solution: “When what they have in conflict seems overriding, then what they have in common needs most to be affirmed.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How can this be done, even in baby steps? What gets in the way?
3. In reading #3, Jay McDaniel suggests that there are two ways to welcome diversity: one is personal interaction, and the second is reading about a religious tradition. Do you agree? Why or why not? Should reading precede personal interaction? Why or why not? How do we balance our reading so that it includes three buckets: 1) factual and historical information, 2) appreciative commentary, i.e., “friendly readings,” and 3) critiques, some of which may be negative? How can we be driven by the need to understand, i.e., “candle lighting,” rather than the temptation to judge?
4. In reading #4, for Rev. Marco Belletini, a significant religion must provide the comforts of community, deepening opportunities that facilitate spiritual growth, and “the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurt us all.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Are there other things that a significant religion should do? If yes, what and why? How well does Unitarian Universalism do all three? Please explain. He suggests that we should not regard our religion as superseding others since our spiritual goal is to “supersede ourselves.” In this regard, how do we “grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries,” which are never easy to see? For Belletini, diversity is not a feel-good slogan “to make us feel like we’re broad-minded.” He concludes, “Diversity is a gift.” In what ways is this true? Are there “limitations and ...constrictive boundaries” regarding our/your valuing of diversity? There are engagement differences between superficial diversity, which is more about tolerance, and deep diversity, which pluralism promotes by facilitating deep engagement. How can we be open to deep diversity? Belletini’s metaphor is “the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts.” What is your metaphor? What is your practice?
5. In reading #5, Diana Eck writes that pluralism 1) “is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*,” 2) “is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*,” 3) “is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*,” and 4) “is *based on dialogue*, [which] ...means both speaking and listening, ...that ...reveals both common understandings and real differences.” Are there elements here that give you a better understanding of the nature of pluralism? Which? Why? Do you value pluralism? Why? What makes the practice of pluralism difficult? What helps? Why?
6. In reading #6, Rev. Emmy Lou Belcher writes that the issue before us is “whether we can respect differing searches for truth.” How has Unitarian Universalism supported “differing searches for truth?” Can we improve on this? How? For Belcher, the common value is that “all people are ...called to account for what they do, not for what they believe.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Belcher notes, “The goal of a pluralistic society is not for people to think alike, but for them to shape a good world from within their mutual values.” What mutual values do you think we share with other religious traditions? How can these help shape a good world?
7. In reading #7, Anne Applebaum, referring to work by Karen Stenner, writes that Stenner “has argued that about a third of the population in any country has what she calls an authoritarian predisposition.” Does this number surprise you? Applebaum notes, “An authoritarian predisposition, ...favors homogeneity and order” while a “libertarian predisposition ...favors diversity and difference.” Where do you fall on this continuum? Do you know people at both extremes? How would you describe them? Is an authoritarian predisposition problematic? Why? Applebaum writes that an authoritarian predisposition “is anti-pluralist, ...is suspicious of people with different ideas [and] ... is allergic to fierce debates.” Assuming this is true, can you engage with this predisposition meaningfully?

Why or why not? See concludes that an authoritarian predisposition "...is a frame of mind, not a set of ideas." Does this make it more understandable or less?

***The following questions are related to the Snippets***

8. Diana Eck, the founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, calls herself a Christian pluralist, which allows her to live and define her faith "not by its borders, but by its roots" as she encounters other world religions. How is her approach different from that of conservative Christians? What would a Unitarian Universalist pluralist look like? Do Unitarian Universalists practice pluralism? How?
9. James Conlon writes, "At the heart of creativity is diversity." Do you agree? Why or why not? For him, both diversity and creativity can be stifled by bureaucratic structures. How might this happen? What changes in an organization could cause diversity and creativity to flourish? Conlon writes, "In the creative process, we surrender and often become astonished at what happens as we revere the diversity of ethos, language, history, and place." How can this diversity contribute to the creative process?
10. Scott Russell Sanders admits to being a poor sort of shaman, having never become an otter, even for an instant. Still, he writes, "...the yearning to leap across the distance, the reaching out in imagination to a fellow creature, seems to me a worthy impulse, perhaps the most encouraging and distinctive one we have." Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you reached out to another across differences of race or gender, age, or class? What were the results? What supports this reaching out? What hinders it? Is this being discouraged in some countries, e.g., the U.S., where Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are being undermining? What threat does this pose to diversity? How does it discourage pluralism? How can such initiatives be opposed?
11. Terry Tempest Williams was wary of the middle way between the right and left worlds, but that changed in the middle of her life. On a continuum, where have you stood between these two worlds? Why? Has that changed? How? Why? She finds more complex conversations and wisdom in the middle. Why might that be true? Whether right or left, she writes, "the stories told are largely set, there much to defend at the expense of the other, rhetoric is charged with certitude; it's safer here, we are sure we are correct." Have you had some feelings like this in the world you inhabit? What are the downsides of such certitude and inability to enter discussions with heart and mind open, which pluralism requires? Williams concludes, "Variety is lost. Diversity is lost. Creativity is lost in our inability to make love with the world." Do you agree with her? Why or why not? Is this the ultimate divide: people who choose to make love with the world and those who don't?
12. Mary Boys and Sara Lee explain the fundamental limitations of tolerance. Tolerance allows people to live alongside each other "without demeaning them," but it does not "require that they learn anything from the other." Do you agree with their sentiments? Why or why not? Although tolerance is sometimes referred to as a negative virtue, why is it important? What would society be like without it? Boys and Lee write, "Pluralism ...demands pursuing understanding..." How does understanding the other change reality? Why do we seem to stay in our tribes rather than crossing borders large and small to experience diversity and seek understanding? They conclude, "Pluralism is built upon an encounter of commitments and a respect for difference that comes from extensive knowledge of one's tradition." What is your grounding in Unitarian Universalism? How would you carry your faith commitments into a dialogue with someone with very different beliefs, e.g., an Evangelical Christian?
13. Ray Riergert writes, "To know only one religion is to know none at all." How might this be true? How has your consideration of other systems of thought, i.e., religious, political, etc., clarified, challenged, or expanded your thinking? He notes, "The ancient Greeks sent observers to neighboring lands to study the ways of other spiritual communities and find ideas for their own practice." How might we act in similar ways? Doing so writes Riergert, would help us move "from tolerance to reverence." Would this be a good move? What might that shift look like?
14. Yi-Fu Tuan uses "the confluence of many hearths in one great place" as a metaphor for diversity. What meanings does this metaphor have for you? Historically, a hearth was the center of a home, so it captured warmth, connection, and hospitality, especially the welcome of the stranger. Are there ways in which the practice of hospitality is similar to the practice of pluralism? For Tuan, common experiences combined with the power of imagination make it "entirely possible for one person to stand in the shoes of another...." What role does empathy play in hospitality and pluralism? Finally, why is it important "for one people to understand and appreciate the worldview of others?"
15. Parker Palmer writes that we "fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives." How might this happen? What happens when "facts not in evidence" are placed in evidence by another, facts that we have not had to make sense of, facts that are not easy to contend





with? Palmer adds, “Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation?” How might this be true? Has some encounter challenged you? What were the circumstances? How were you challenged or changed?

16. Bradford Keeney writes about the old man Running Elk, who participated in the old traditions of his people and several Christian churches, prayed to Mecca daily, and practiced Buddhist meditation. What do you make of his eclecticism? Have/ do you pursue religious practices of other religious traditions? If yes, what have they meant to you? If not, how might doing so enrich you? What is required for us to gain some understanding of another religious tradition? How might this help with interfaith dialogue? What is required for use to gain some understanding of another political ideology? How might such religious or political literacy aid us in dialogue with others?

17. Joan Chittister writes, “There is no excuse now for simply dropping out of life.” Do you agree with her? Why or why not? While you can drop out at any age, she is primarily concerned with elders dropping out. Why do people drop out? Why do elders drop out? Have you ever dropped out? If yes, why? If not, can you imagine doing so one day? She counsels that elders take their place among the sages of the world. Does this make sense? Why or why not? Have you known sages? If yes,

what did they mean to you? Did they mentor you? Are you willing to become a sage? What is required to do so? Her goal is “a society based on equality, respect for others, and pluralism.” What is your goal?

