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An Experiment So Bold

My friend Peter gets himself worked up about pronouns. Normally hip, a wide, empathic thinker, he is possessive about pronouns. “This is my language!” he cries. “All my life, these are my words! How can people decide they mean something else?!” Specifically, he has trouble wrapping his head around people choosing the pronouns “they” and “theirs.” Non-binary people.

Pronouns are powerful. During my chaplaincy training at Maine Medical Center, a woman in our cohort was beginning to find the words to articulate what she realized was her truth – that maleness was her true gender expression. As she began researching her options, I asked what pronouns she would like the six of us in the cohort to use. At first surprised (she hadn’t gone there yet), she then became elated and grateful to start using “he and his” at once. Today he is on the other side of it all, content and whole.

For many non-binary people, pronouns are important. “Non-binary” – and please help me find better ways to put this, I know I have a lot to learn – “non-binary” is about gender expression. Once upon a time, there was male and female (in that order, but that’s another subject). You were one or the other. For many people today, that doesn’t work. Some people prefer to occupy the space in between. Actor Johnny Depp once spoke lovingly of the “gender-fluidity” of his daughter. That’s another term for non-binary – increasingly common terms these days.

Who remembers Billy Porter at the Oscars last winter? An African American actor known for his gender-fluid style, he cut a striking figure on the red carpet in an exquisite formal black gown. It looked pretty awesome. It occurred to me that night that our culture might be headed that way – toward a future with total freedom of expression in how we present ourselves to the world, what we wear, how we adorn ourselves. Is this way of being becoming a new horizon for us – surprising or discomfiting today and normal tomorrow?

A bakery in my town seems to attract non-binary workers. Guys in skirts, a lot of body adornment. There’s one server whose gender identity mystifies me. But when I find myself wondering about it, I realize I don’t really care and don’t need to know at all. Instead, I observe this person’s happy affect and think, “Good for him or her or them – that this world – or at least this place – feels safe and supports who they are, who they’re becoming.” That bakery feels – as, I hope this Fellowship does – like a place where a seeker can thrive. Where one can dare figure out who we are...perhaps in the open, seen and heard in our becoming.

Pronouns, such little words, can trip up our most inclusive, most well-intentioned 1st principle selves. Especially the little pronoun “we.”

“We” is key to being human. It is the first word of our Constitution: “**We** the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the

Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.”

From its beginnings, people have referred to the United States as a great, grand experiment. An experiment in democracy, a social experiment, a racial experiment. “Experiment” meaning that this is something new, something we’re trying out, and we’re not sure of the eventual outcome. In this experiment of the United States, we are living *into* the outcome inspired by the lofty principles of liberty, the pursuit of happiness, justice for all.

Has everything worked out great? Well, it’s still unfolding. It’s hard. Painful...and none of us knows what will happen as the experiment continues.

People also refer to the Unitarian Universalist movement as an experiment. As America is a young nation, UUism is a young religion, compared to others. Only 50 years old. For hundreds of years, Unitarians (one God or Mystery) and Universalists (one Love) evolved, and they merged in 1966, leading to the crafting and negotiating and word-smithing of our Principles, which we hold so dear. Here, too, the word “we” is important, as in “**We**, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association” on the plaque in the entry downstairs just inside our front door. “**We**, people of conscience.”

Just as America struggles to uphold the rights of each individual and, at the same time, the good of all, Unitarian Universalism struggles to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and, at the same time, our oneness – our shared principles, our common humanity, the interdependent web of which we are apart. And do we struggle!

Committed to multiculturalism and anti-racism, our denomination has worked tirelessly to embody diversity and inclusion. This remains a priority as high as any other in our association. And what we mean by “we” continues to bring us up short. We often stumble. Then, we get up again and strive once more to successfully, mindfully juggle and integrate the individual and the whole. This is our sacred work.

Last month, our General Assembly, the annual meeting of all UUs who want to come, met in Spokane, Washington. The theme was “The Power of *We*.” This is what we’re talking about, right? Living our lives and our principles as “we,” transcending and respecting our individual differences.

Every year, in the several days before General Assembly starts, our ministers’ association holds a worship service called “The 25/50 Service” in which two sermons are given by UU ministers chosen by their colleagues for their wisdom and contributions to our tradition – one a 25-year minister and the other a 50-year minister. I always look forward to this. It never fails to be powerful and inspiring. This year it was controversial as well, in part because of that pesky word “we.”

While some, maybe most, of the people there listened appreciatively, it was announced afterward that several dozen people had left the room in protest. I have not spoken directly with anyone

who left but heard others say that in one and perhaps both sermons, certain words caused pain and did not feel inclusive to some people, including some non-binary people in the room.

Listening and trying to understand, as a large group, became the work of the day: work that was uncomfortable, sometimes painful, poignant, good, and necessary. It was not the only time that week that well-intentioned, committed UUs spoke personal pain into microphone: the pain of needing to feel more seen, more heard, more respected; the pain of wanting not only acknowledgement but also to part of “we,” to belong. How curious that again and again this issue comes up, this time at a GA called “The Power of **We**.” The 1st principle we claim – that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person – continues to remind us of its complexity.

Are our ideals crazy lofty? You bet they are. Do we believe in the worth and dignity of every person? Yes. Will we always get it right? No! Are we going to make mistakes? Sure thing. Will we learn from them? Every time. Can we predict when we’ll get there? Where we’ll be when we do get there? Does it sometimes feel like an up-hill climb? Yes, yes.

I love Christina Rossetti’s images of climbing and climbing, aspiring to get somewhere, yet so very weary in the work of getting there. I also love in her poem that, for all travelers, there is a bed at the inn. We all have a place there.

UUism is young. Little about it is etched in stone. It is hard to stay curious and open to what’s next, especially when things get choppy. We can easily veer into “we” and “they.” And...learning how to live together is what we’re here to do. Sometimes it’s glorious, and sometimes it feels like an up-hill climb. We know how steep a climb from living life – from growing up in families, having friendships, marriages, and from dealing with people every bit as complicated as we.

Partly because of the accident of our birth and partly by choice, we live grand experiments, meant to challenge and grow us – one is the experiment of this young idealistic country; another is the experiment of this young idealistic faith tradition. Notice what they ask of us: Not that we follow blindly, but that we engage. Not that we expect ourselves to be perfect but that we trust that we are enough, as we are, to tend to the next right thing. Not that we arrive with our minds made up or that we need to be right. No, we are called to keep our heads up and curious, and our hearts open and hopeful.

Experiments like ours, with lofty underpinnings, ask us less to go along with the flow and more to trust ourselves and to pay attention. The experiment evolves every time we listen generously, speak with care and make amends when we miss the mark.

Experiments change all the time. That’s their nature. We humans are up to that challenge. We have what it takes. For this, we humbly give thanks.

So may it be.

Reading

Up-Hill

By Christina Rossetti

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?^{[L][SEP]}

Yes, to the very end.^{[L][SEP]}

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

^{[L][SEP]} From morn to night, my friend.^{[L][SEP]}

^{[L][SEP]} But is there for the night a resting-place?^{[L][SEP]}

A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.^{[L][SEP]}

May not the darkness hide it from my face?^{[L][SEP]}

You cannot miss that inn.^{[L][SEP]}

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?^{[L][SEP]}

Those who have gone before.^{[L][SEP]}

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?^{[L][SEP]}

They will not keep you waiting at that door.^{[L][SEP]}

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?^{[L][SEP]}

Of labour you shall find the sum.^{[L][SEP]}

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?^{[L][SEP]}

Yea, beds for all who come.