

Diversity or Division Making Sure We Know the Difference

By

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On Monday we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., now a Federal Holiday that immortalizes his life, work, and sacrifice pursuing equality for all. “I have a dream that one day... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” This statement, in particular, expresses my own deepest yearning for our species, that we see past our differences and learn that we are all part of one human family, and as such, nobody is ever left out. Authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt say this statement “epitomized” King’s *common humanity identity politics*. “Part of Dr. King’s genius,” they say, “was that he appealed to the shared morals and identities of Americans by using the unifying languages of religion and patriotism. He repeatedly used the metaphor of family, referring to the people of all races and religions as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters.’”¹

The sad alternative to this humanistic ethic is what they call *common-enemy identity politics*, which divides us into tribes by rallying us against an outside group we don’t identify with. They ascribe this ethic to Hitler, who used it against the Jews “to unify and expand his Third Reich,”² further lamenting, “it is among the most shocking aspects of our current age that some Americans (and Europeans), mostly young white men, have openly embraced neo-Nazi ideals and symbols.”³ This has hit home since the election of Donald Trump, who used common-enemy identity politics to get elected, emboldening some of these local white nationalists to begin plastering white supremacist flyers and graffiti on local synagogues, the Salish School, Black churches, and social justice organizations like the Center for Justice and even our own church. We learned only a few months ago that the white nationalist and duly elected Washington State Representative, Matt Shea, is part of a militant Christian identity organization that has targeted several progressive groups and individuals in our community on a list that includes my name and the name of our church.

Even more disturbing, as far as I’m concerned, is that many liberal institutions and organizations around the country have also embraced divisive common-enemy identity politics. They claim we are all so fundamentally different based upon qualities like our gender, skin color, nationality, sexuality, cultural background, and so on, that we can’t possibly understand each other. Nor can we empathize with each other, for the kind of pain we feel is so linked to our individual identities that it is not possible for one identity group

¹ Lukianoff, Greg, and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 60.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*

to feel the pain of another. It alienates us from one another. Straight people can't possibly know what a gay person is going through, or a man a woman, or a white a nonwhite, or a Christian a Muslim. Not only does this divisive morality make the claim we can't understand or empathize with each other, but that it is fundamentally immoral to even try. We must all just keep quiet and segregate into identity-based safe-zones where we can be free of the offensive and hurtful presence of those who cannot possibly relate to us.

I recently received a communication from a music composer in New England who told me of an accomplished white male musician there who had been popular in Unitarian Universalist churches. This was so until he was accused of cultural appropriation for often using "jazz, gospel and other idioms from African and African-American music in his compositions," after he'd been commissioned by the UU Musicians Network to write a song for one of its conferences. I'm told the UUMN issued a public apology and this composer is seldom invited to perform in Unitarian Universalist churches anymore. His name is Brian Tate, and one of his best-known songs is entitled, "We are One."

When we walk / When we sleep / When we
rise / We are one

When we laugh / When we sing / When we
cry / When we run / We are one

And we shall love one another with all our
hearts

And we shall care for each other with all our
soul / & our might

When we stand / When we fall / When we
rise / We are one

In the cold / In the heat / In the dark, in the
sun / we are one

And we shall love one another with all our
hearts

And we shall care for each other with all our
soul / & our might

(Ah) When we're hurting one another
That's the way we hurt ourselves

With our sisters and our brothers, we will rise

And we do / And we try

We must live or we die

We will reach / we will climb

We will rise, we will fly, we are one.

And these words shall be forever within our
hearts

And we shall teach them to our children

And remember them in our lives

When—We—Walk—When we sleep / when
we rise / we are one

When we laugh /when we sing / when cry
/when we run

We are strong / We belong / We are / ONE!

Do these sound like the sentiments of a person who can't understand anyone else? Do they sound like the words of a "racist" and "thief," as he is now accused of being? I wonder if when Dr. King dreamt of children of all colors joining hands "as sisters and brothers" he imagined they shouldn't also influence and inspire each other and sing their songs together. Yet that's the common-enemy identity ethic, that if you aren't with us, a member of our specific identity group, our tribe, you must be against us. This is the opposite of Jesus' radical common-humanity ethic that countered, "If you're not against us, you're for us." In other words, unless

someone is actively working against us, they are not our enemy. Just being different or thinking different is no reason to fear them and doesn't excuse us to demonize them.

This contentious ethic, furthermore, goes against everything Civil Rights has struggled for over generations. Until now it has been based upon the claim, as the song says, "We are One." How could we otherwise care about each other if it's true we are so different that it's not possible for us to do so? On the contrary, our slow progress toward justice happens precisely because we do learn to care for each other by relating to each other as fellow human beings, as sisters and brothers, despite our differences. Eventually we even come to appreciate and celebrate and imitate those differences. We can't help it. That's the common-humanity ethic, and that's how humanity works. It's impossible for us not to influence and inspire each other. We can't help but communicate art, ideas, and culture anymore than we can keep from communicating colds to each other. We communicate these things because we are one.

In her latest book, *Don't Label Me*, educator Irshad Manji makes a similar distinction between what she calls "honest diversity" and "dishonest diversity." One promotes our common ground, the other labels and segregates us. Manji says, "*Dishonest* diversity labels people as a substitute for understanding them."⁴ This sounds like what the fellow who emailed me about Brian Tate experienced: "my attempts to engage in this debate," he said, led to verbal attacks against him. "I no longer feel like I can continue to be a member of my current church, given its dogmatism and given that I apparently can't speak my mind about certain important issues without being accused of causing pain and worse."

Dishonest diversity doesn't allow for conversation, let alone debate, and uses the *ad hominem* fallacy, attacking the character of others, as its chief tactic in silencing any resistance to this new form of segregation. Some of you may be following the *Doonesbury* comic strip series in which a college president is under attack by its students because he wants to desegregate the school, including its dorms and dining areas. What a paradox to lampoon at this point in our history! In one strip the president explains, "It means letting 1,000 flowers bloom, celebrating our multicultural diversity instead of letting it drive us into isolated, hostile camps." But the students want no part of it.

When "Practicing honest diversity," Manji counters, "we listen without having to agree; we cultivate common ground even as we stand our ground; we act from a place of grace."⁵ I think this means being charitable toward each other, and assuming best intentions. But we can't do so if we practice the "either for us or against us" common-enemy identity ethics. We can't be charitable to people we unfairly demonize.

I think it's especially important for us to grasp this difference because part of our mission as a congregation is working toward *diversity*. The question is, what kind of diversity are we

⁴ Manji, Irshad, *Don't Label Me*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2019. p. 33.

⁵ Ibid.

work toward: honest or dishonest? Is it tempered with our historic commitment to promoting our common humanity, that we are part of one human family and there's nothing about any of us that makes us so different we can't coexist? Or do we ignore this value by segregating into separate camps? If being together now means we must all agree with each other, if being heard and listened to now means the same as being agreed with, and if being healthy and whole means there are no polarities in our community, then I don't think we honestly want diversity. Groupthink is the opposite of diversity, and, until now, has been the antithesis of Unitarian Universalism.

Social philosopher Philip Devine reminds us, "Diversity, though currently celebrated on the Left, is a traditionally conservative idea, usually opposed to equality."⁶ The term originally emerged to counter those calling for integrated and pluralistic societies. Conservative George Kennan, for example, the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union under President Eisenhower, once said, "I have lived in and read about cities in other countries where several cultural and ethnic communities lived peacefully side by side, each in its own part of town... looking to their own particular communities for the meeting of their social, religious, and educational needs... all went well... No melting pot was thought necessary, and indeed, none was ever achieved."⁷ That sounds more to me like dishonest diversity talking. It sounds more like the idea of "separate but equal." And it sounds a lot like what many mean today when speaking of diversity.

By contrast, Dr. King famously said we are all "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of *destiny*." That's honest diversity. That's the real thing. That's diversity that brings us together rather than tears us apart. It's integration, not segregation. It's the kind of community I want to help create. It's the mission that gives my life meaning. For me, it's what it means to work for justice.

⁶ Devine, Philip E., *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 1996, p. 100.

⁷ Kennan, George F., *Around the Cragged Hill*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1993, p. 128.