

Unitarian Society of Hartford  
Sunday August 5, 2007  
A Rose Is A Rose Is A Rose .. Or Is It?  
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**“Reality, mostly, is not what it is but what we have decided it is.”**

“A little old Jewish lady sits down in a plane next to a big Swede and keeps staring him. Finally she turns to him and says, “Pardon me, are you Jewish?”

He says. “No”.

A few minutes later she turns to him again and says, “You can tell me, you know - you are Jewish, aren't you?”

He says, “Most certainly not”.

She keeps studying him for some minutes, then says again, “I can tell you are Jewish”.

In order to get rid of the annoyance, the man says, “Okay, so I'm Jewish.”

“She looks at him again, shakes her head, and says, “You certainly don't look it.”

Anthony de Mello  
Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations  
Doubleday 1983

**Good morning.** It is a pleasure to gather with you all today.

I can really identify with our friend, the woman on the airplane, in the earlier reading from Anthony de Mello's book “Taking Flight”. She has it figured out. Even if she has to bend it and turn it inside out until it conforms to her own expectations, she has decided what's true and what isn't; what's real and what isn't.

And don't we all do that and haven't we all had that done to us? I mean, don't we create our own reality when we label people as liberal, conservative, Democrat,

Republican, and Independent (I mean, just ask Joe Liberman or Michael Bloomberg what it means to be an Independent!)? Don't we know what we mean and don't we assume everyone else means the same thing when we use the words **family, disabled, pro-life, evangelical, gay, straight, black, white, and marriage**? Don't we label each other by the cars we drive, the houses we live in and the schools we attend and the jobs or accents we have? Isn't a rose a rose and don't we all know it?

Perhaps we label something to give it meaning and perspective, perhaps even to give it life. We read the Creation story in the Bible in which God named all the animals and all the things of the earth; He named them and gave them Life and it was all "good". Everything had its place. Order was created out of Chaos; night was differentiated from day and good was distinguished from bad. And it was good.

All religions of the world have such Creation stories, explanations of ways the world and everything in it came to be, explanations, which provide some context for our place and role in the world. These stories give us a sense of order and security. By naming things, we think we can know and control them, and, therefore, reduce our feelings of disorder, confusion, and insecurity. By naming things, we know where we belong.

Naming and labeling are not just found in world mythologies, but in the social structures of society and in science. The caste system in India is a way for people to know their place in society, a roster of rules that dictate how to behave, who to marry, where to work and live, and so on; it is a way to create order out of chaos, and it has been this way for centuries. People in that society know where they belong.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, created a hierarchy of categories to define first, the plant world, and later, all living things. His classification scheme became the standard of scientific definition; he defined and labeled the plant and animal world. Three centuries later, his system is being questioned as the only way to define all living things; today, some scientists are suggesting that organisms should be classified by their genetic make up, their DNA and RNA sequences, rather than by their descendents. In other words, questions are being raised about the labels he created, suggesting that there might not be just one way to name or understand things.

**There might not be just one way to name or understand things.**

On the other hand, the poet Lucille Clifton said in an interview last May that the act of naming – an object, a pet, a person – is an act of aggression almost akin to an act of war. In an article run in the Hartford Courant on May 10, she says, "There's a kind of arrogance in thinking that the name I give something is what it

calls itself". ... "It's demeaning. Once we have given something a name, we expect it to be that thing."

**"Once we have given something a name, we expect it to be that thing."**

Do we...do I...do that?

Well...maybe. Well, kinda sorta ...ok, yes, I suppose so.

In the summer of 1992, I was getting my masters in social work and doing an internship in emergency psychiatric medicine at the Hartford Hospital. Having spent the previous 15 years working in bucolic downtown Bloomfield at CIGNA, I was initially intimidated driving into Hartford every day. At first, I rolled the windows of my van all the way up, locked the doors, and held my breath. I thought Hartford and the people who lived there were scary, dangerous, and armed. I expected them to be a certain way. About a month into my internship, after four weeks of providing psychiatric services to people who lived in the community, people who were suicidal, addicted, living with AIDS, battling alcohol and poverty and all types of discrimination, I was in love. These were my people! I thought I should move down to Park Street, live in the community and show my solidarity with the brave and strong folks who lived there. They were strong, heroic, and victims of an oppressive society; they were not to blame for any of the problems they faced; no, they were innocent of all responsibility for the way their lives were.

Well, obviously neither image is correct. I had moved from one inaccurate label to another. Neither label reflected reality. I was like the woman on the airplane, bending reality to shape my vision of it.

The people I was working with were, of course, human, dignified, and worthy of respect but that didn't mean I needed to change my life and go live in their community. They were heroic AND victimizers. They were responsible AND innocent. They were like all of us; they were human. I didn't need to exchange one label for another.

Another story.

Several years earlier, while still at CIGNA, I went to Philadelphia for a job interview. The new job was in the Marketing Department and would require me to travel to Philly once a month for about a year. I was interviewed by a vice president in the Human Resources Department. His final question to me was "What makes you think you can do this job? After all, you're in a wheelchair?"

Well, this was in 1988, two years before the Americans with Disabilities Act so his comment was not illegal. He was clearly labeling me. He incorrectly made a connection between my physical disability and my intellectual ability. He was

creating his own reality of who I was. He named me and thought that's who I was. Two post-scripts: One, I got the job. And two, the next day, as we all do, I thought of the perfect response to his question. When he said to me "What makes you think you can do the job? After all, you're in a wheelchair", I should have responded, "Well, what makes you think you can do your job? After all, you're stupid!"

Of course, then I wouldn't have gotten the job but it sure would have felt good!

So, here we have it. We have Creation stories and caste systems, and naming and defining the plant and animal worlds into various categories. We think we understand the world based on somewhat arbitrary distinctions of where we live, what we look like, how old we are, who we love, what language we speak, the color of our skin, what cars we drive or other characteristics, many of which we have absolutely no control over and which mean relatively little about who we really are.

Now, of course, we need SOME definitions and labels and limits in order to make our way through the world. Children need to learn certain behaviors in order to be safe and understand their place in the world; language has grammatical rules which help us comprehend what another is saying; traffic laws need to be obeyed; accounting principles need to be followed; and let's not forget the infield fly rule in baseball.

But what about the "written and unwritten rules" that we all live with, **rules which benefit some people while injuring others**. Frank Harris, chair of the Department of Journalism at Southern CT State University and a columnist for the Hartford Courant, recently returned from a trip to South Africa where, he says, there is an effort to create a nonracial society, a society in which race does not determine privilege. Some, he wrote, think this is what the Supreme Court is doing in this country by eliminating race as a criterion in assigning children to public schools. The difference, Mr. Harris says, is that in South Africa, unearned economic, political, and educational privileges accrued to the minority white population, so the removal of race as an important factor in these areas has helped to create a nonracial society...race is no longer relevant to the acquisition of power and the society is becoming more inclusive. In this country, whites are the majority in the economic, political, and educational realms so social justice advocates ENCOURAGE using race as a specific criterion in order to balance power...to prevent exclusion and broaden inclusion. Both countries are moving from one old set of rules and labels to new sets of rules and labels to expand the definition of community.

And isn't this what we as an Association and as a congregation are doing? Aren't we looking for more ways to be inclusive, to expand our tent to more and more folks? In my role as co-chair of the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee, a UUA committee appointed by the UUA Board of Trustees, we are

charged to monitor and assess the progress of the UUA toward becoming an authentic anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and multicultural faith community. This past year we surveyed all 21 UUA districts and then examined 5 districts in depth on these very issues. We spoke with district leadership about policies, leadership, workshops, budgets, participation of folks from traditionally marginalized communities, and more, all aimed at creating a snapshot of where five districts are right now on the journey toward wholeness, toward becoming inclusive faith communities. We had no expectations or standards; no limits, rules, labels or right answers; we merely wanted to hear from leaders in five districts what they are doing to become more inclusive. We had no vision or expectation as to what 'reality' was; rather, we maintained "a beginner's mind" and kept ourselves open to their answers. Since we completed our report, we have learned that many districts are spending more time and energy working on these issues; just asking the questions has loosened up their definition of their own reality...of who they are and who they want to be.

And here at the Unitarian Society of Hartford, we have become more inclusive and perhaps loosened up our own definition of who we are. We have added a second service to create more opportunities for folks to worship here; we have broadened our worship service with more lay and youth participation and musical variety; we have improved our sound system, added parking, and created pew cuts for people with physical limitations; we support the work of the Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice and the Center City Churches to demonstrate our commitment to the Hartford Community, and soon we will be proposing a mental health ministry. Through all of these activities, our sense of who we are has expanded.

Later this year we will be participating in a curriculum called, Building the World We Dream About, which will help us think about how we see the world and ourselves, how we see "reality", and how that "reality" of labels may limit us and our understanding of the world, may limit us as people and as Unitarian-Universalists. We may learn how expanding our limits and understandings will help us become more inclusive, more willing to admit that there might be more than one way to name or understand something. That maybe something isn't the way we think it is...maybe it has a different name for itself than the one we give it. Maybe we can name something with a big enough name that we can allow it to expand and grow and be more than we originally think it is. Maybe we can grow and expand and be more than we think we are.

Maybe a rose isn't just..... a rose...maybe it's a bright yellow... 'Texas' or 'Henry Fonda' or a 'french perfume.' Maybe it's a lavender "Barbara Streisand" or 'fragrant plum' or 'simplicity purple.' Maybe it's a pinky 'Barbara Bush' or 'Eiffel Tower' or "first kiss." Or MAYBE it's a reddest red "Mr. Lincoln" or "Prospero" or "Santa Claus."

Maybe it's a shrub, a rambler, a tea, a climber, or a polyanthus, or a floribunda, or a miniature.

Maybe it's a wild rose, a rose of Sharon, a rose bud, a rose garden, or a rose hip!!! Maybe it doesn't even have a name yet...maybe it is a rose waiting to be known.

May WE in this beloved place, expand and extend, challenge our self imposed limits and those limits imposed on us by tradition and history, imposed by age, race, sex, or other capacity or distinguishing characteristic. May we be liberated from our expectations. And may our love for one another be like....a red red rose.

And so may it be.

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