

Our fascination helps to bind the universe together. As Brian Swimme described in our reading: Each of us has our own allurements, our own particular love affair with life. We awake, as does everything in the universe, to our own set of attractions. Each one of us, a bee in search of a certain flower: yielding nectar for more than ourselves, and pollen to support a range of life. Our unique passion, our individual personality, our very particular way of being fascinated with the world, is what makes deep connection possible.

Most of us know how true this is and how difficult it is to be truly individual--to really follow our hearts. We all have our own unique orientation to the world: the things that make us smile when no one is watching, the activities we engage in most naturally and frequently. Most of us know what that is in our own lives, but many of us don't share that very readily. I've known people for decades before discovering what truly excites them.

I'm not sure most of us ever entirely transcend the adolescent mandate not to stand out, especially in a way that could be seen as odd. It is risky at any age to let the most precious parts of our selves be seen and known, and possibly rejected. It is safer to keep them under wraps. But it is those unique parts that bring us joy and can bring joy to others as well. It is that unique element, a clear and focused allurements that may look like a limit from the outside, but actually helps to bind the universe together and create amazing possibility.

Every once in a while we meet someone who seems truly unique. But, they are simply letting their uniqueness show. I met Rose soon after college. She was sweet and easy to talk to and funny. She had the makings of a good friend. But it was only when I got into her car the first time that she stood out in my mind. That woman could sing, and she did sing—every song that came on the radio. She knew every word and every note. When we arrived at the store I was surprised again—every song that came over the sound system she would sing, loud and clear. I loved watching peoples' reactions. One woman looked at her, smiled and said: "I love that song too." Others simply stood and stared. Some joined in so that there would be a whole aisle of singing. That day Rose sang right through the checkout line, and it was clear she did it all the time.

She was being herself, and most others found it fascinating. Her unique and obvious passion drew people toward her and toward each other. There was this binding quality to her particular allurements being expressed. It was not one someone else could imitate. Others would have to discover their own unique fascination with the universe. And that encounter with Rose was the encouragement to do just that. Each of us has a niche, a niche that supports and connects others. Each of us has a field of attraction that attracts. It is something upon which we depend, this uniqueness that supports the uniqueness of others. Respecting and allowing for difference affirms and supports life.

This does not, however, discount the modern cultural pressure toward sameness, the push for conformity that ensnares us if we aren't watchful. It seems more efficient and productive, but each time we venture there we discover it to be the opposite of life enhancing. Nature loves and thrives upon variety; it is truly the spice of life. And the lack of it has become an issue in one of the most important aspect of life: our food. Monoculture is now common practice, where just one crop is grown on a massive tract of land.

It is not nature's way, so there are negative consequences. First the soil becomes depleted because the same plants demand the same nutrients each growing season. Petrochemical fertilizers are added to "solve" the problem, but the soil condition deteriorates because nature's way is to add compost. Soon, the soil cannot hold enough moisture and requires more irrigation. All of this stresses the plants, all in the same way because all are the same. For the inevitable development of infestation and disease pesticides are applied, in larger amounts each time. And of course there are the herbicides for the weeds. Monoculture is food production that is entirely dependent and entirely unsustainable. But the corn is so easy to plant and harvest and ship when it is grown all together like this!

Even vegetables rely on each other to be unique in their needs and articulation. It is something we knew well when small family farms dotted the region. And then some of us thought we could forget it all, and do it differently with massive machines and tons of chemicals. Some of us thought we could deny the value of difference. Some of us were willing to overlook the way we had farmed for thousands of years with varied crops and plant rotation. Each plant draws particular nutrients from the soil and contributes others. Each plant depends upon the uniqueness of others for their own wellbeing. Diversity means health. A farm, like a community is a collection of individual gifts and individual needs.

Life has a way of functioning most smoothly when individuals are articulated most clearly and completely. Joel Salatin is a farmer, writer, lecturer, and wise man—an agricultural genius in the opinion of many. He farms by allowing each crop, herd, or flock to be fully itself. His attention is upon how to interconnect their uniqueness. He farms with a communal sensibility, thus the name "Polyface," or the farm with many faces. Salatin describes how his method of farming "fully honors the pigness of the pig," for example. He lets the pigs be drawn to what they love, like using their noses like little plows and thereby turning over the soil. "The pig," he reflects, "is a co-laborer in this great land-healing ministry."

Of course, this farming practice or land ministry says much about Joel Salatin's unique expression of self. His passion has made him surprisingly famous—for a farmer. People are willing to pay a steep price to spend a day at his farm and learn from him. He had to institute those fees to keep the droves away. In media circles he has become known as a colorful and insightful interview. All of this attention and recognition is simply a byproduct of what he does most naturally. It's sometimes hard to imagine the vast network of connections people can make in the world, simply by doing what they love and being who they are.

Diversity is the allowance of uniqueness, it is the encouragement of it and respect for it. We want diversity in the experiences we enjoy, the food we eat, the friends we have, the education we receive, and the churches we attend. We welcome life's variety and vibrancy. We know that unique viewpoints, individual gifts, and lively conversation are necessary for us to feel fully engaged. These things help to bind us together—and connect us to the world. Diversity creates the kind of environment in which we are free to be ourselves.

This is a particular focus of the Unitarian Universalist Association. There is a generally acknowledged need to pull others into our UU circle, to broaden it with people of different races, cultures, economic means, educational backgrounds, theological leanings, sexual orientation, and age. We are committed to this because we value the uniquely connecting nature of each individual. This in no way limits us as UUs, but enhances what is possible when we come together.

We are an organization always changing and growing, comprised of individuals always changing and growing. It is not that we are drawn to an allurements, and then limited by it. It is always morphing and developing, as are we. From neuroscience we have learned that the human brain continues to grow and change as we age. So we need environments that allow for growth and change, environments that hold us and free us. We need to bump up against the edges of what we can be, and be loved and appreciated for that. It is the cosmic calling of every human being.

The poet, Mary Oliver, is called most particularly to notice the natural world. Her clear and focused orientation hardly seems a limit when it opens her, and those she touches, to amazing possibility. It connects her, and all of us by way of her, to the universe. She writes of her process that seems inseparable from her person: "Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in relationship to rapture. With word, I celebrate this rapture. What I write begins and ends with the act of noticing and cherishing." Mary Oliver is aware of not just what she is, but also what she is not. As she writes: "My affinity is to the whimsical, the illustrative, the suggestive—not to the factual or useful. I walk, and I notice. I am sensual in order to be spiritual. I look into everything without cutting into anything."

This ability to look and act in a particular way while also acknowledging the integrity of the whole—not cutting into anything—illuminates the power of the unique individual. Uniqueness may be seen as a limit, but more than anything it is an embrace of the possible!

It will be your new minister's uniqueness that will bind you to him or her, just as it was Ken's uniqueness that bound you to him. And it is the uniqueness of those in the pews around you that binds you to each other. That is the nature of a covenantal relationship, the one you agree to when you sign the book and become a member of the church. You agree to walk together. You do not agree to see the world the same way, or give up the part of you that feels unique and precious. Walking together assumes we move through the world individually and in consort.

Similarly, our First Principal, of “honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” does not mean we get caught up at the level of the individual, but that we value the way he or she connects to the larger whole. In my mind the First Principle is tied to the Seventh Principle: “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” We value each individual’s uniquely connecting nature. And with that we have churches that flourish, inspire, engage, and comfort. We find a home and a sense of real belonging. It is why many of us came to a UU church, and why we stay.

Now I know we are in an amazing building, becoming more amazing with each passing day, but I would like to give you another image of church: as a nest rather than a building. The structure of a nest is both holding and freeing. Sometimes we want to nestle in for warmth and comfort. Sometimes we perch on the edge and flap our wings. We have a view of the larger world, but are not separate from it. In fact we feel the weather; what is outside is also inside. We are pelted by cold rain, feel the wind rock us, and know the drying power of the sun. When we are fortunate we have a canopy of leaves above us, but that is not always the case. Sometimes we are more visible and more vulnerable. There are many places to build a nest, but this is the place we have chosen to build ours. This place that can hold us as unique individuals and can free us to be ourselves, is the place we have chosen to settle. Who is it that will join us next? How will their uniqueness bind to our own, and bind us all together?

We come together today in this church that serves as a nest, and it is where we can sing unashamed and unreserved. It is where we can value what each loves most, and make that our ministry. It is where we can pay attention to the whimsical, the illustrative, and the suggestive, as well as the factual and the useful. It is where each of us can find our own voice and join together in song that is meant to attract attention, and help bind the universe together. It is where you can “let *your* note be clear.”