

Taking Refuge in Discipline and Diversity
February 21, 2010

In his book, *Outcasts United*, which we heard Barbara read from earlier, with the story of the two sets of boys responding so differently to the low flying fighter jets, and which you got a glimpse of during Time for All Ages, learning where all the boys on the Fugees soccer team came from, Warren St. John at one point notes research done by British anthropologist Steven Vertovec. Vertovec explores the dynamics and tensions that occur in communities where there is a large influx of immigrant and refugee residents, and he calls those complex cultural dynamics “super-diversity.” Better known places that experience such super-diversity include major cities such as New York, London, Mumbai, and Hong Kong.

Studying super-diversity in the United Kingdom, which is now home to people from every former colony of the United

Kingdom and beyond, Vertovec seeks strategies for making super-diversity work—that is, for people to be able to live with and among each other—not just coincidentally near each other.

One of the first things Vertovec discovered in his study, says St. John, is that “top-down efforts to impose contact and understanding between various groups were likely to fail; connecting was something that individuals would have to accomplish organically on their own.”

Now, reading *Outcasts United* in preparation for this sermon, I was stopped for a moment by those lines. For here I am, standing before you at the pulpit once more to preach the importance of diversity, and to remind us that our mission statement *says* we’re *deliberately* inclusive. Additionally, to support my message from up here at the pulpit, one of the readings I asked Barbara to share was the words of another

Unitarian Universalist minister, Kat Liu, who quite frankly questions and challenges our authenticity as a prophetic church, if we do not recognize, quote, “the concerns of those at the margins of society and [help] bring those concerns into equal consideration with the concerns of those in power.”

While it is my hope that my Sunday morning messages don't seem too much “from the top down,” I do wonder if there are those of you who feel the *inorganic* nature of such a message when it comes from the pulpit, and consequently, who instead of taking risks, will *resist* the effort to expand your cultural and interpersonal horizons. I wonder.

Whether or not that's the case, though, I'll tell you I am *personally* grateful to have come across Warren St. John's book, *Outcasts United*, in which he chronicles the challenging, disciplined, and determined journey of one group of people to find unity in diversity. Now, remember, the subtitle of *Outcasts*

United is “An American town, a refugee team, and one woman’s quest to make a difference.” In order for you to get a decent snapshot of the story, let me quote from the book’s back cover:

Clarkston, Georgia, was a typical southern town until it was designated a refugee settlement center in the 1990s, becoming the first American home for scores of families from the world’s war zones—from Liberia and Sudan to Iraq and Afghanistan. Suddenly Clarkston’s streets were filled with women wearing the hijab, the smells of cumin and curry, and kids of all colors playing soccer in any open space they could find—the last thanks to Luma Mufleh, an American-educated Jordanian woman who starts a youth soccer team to unify Clarkston’s refugee children. [The quote continues:] With unsentimental compassion and grueling training sessions, and defying ... local resistance, Mufleh leads her players through an unforgettable season. In return, from the kids and their grateful loved ones, she receives “a family of 120.”

Whether you are an anthropologist, a war historian, someone struggling with the changing face of your neighborhood, a mother, a father, or simply a fan of soccer, I promise this is a book worth picking up and reading. And, though the story takes place in a small suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, I also guarantee that you will find the story *relevant* to our life here in Austin, Texas. While our diversity may center on the presence of Central and Latin American immigrants more than on refugees from Africa and the Middle East, it doesn't take too much effort to see the similar struggles that Clarkston, Georgia and Austin, Texas, face around culture, language, poverty, education, crime, police relations, local government policies, and more.

Perhaps most importantly, though, I *hope* that by reading *Outcasts United*, you will be inspired to take the risk of organically experiencing that interpersonal, and intercultural,

connection that Vertovec notes as essential for making diversity work. One way I already see some of us choosing to stretch ourselves into the broader community is in members of the Wildflower Austin Interfaith team stepping forward to work with other member congregations of Austin Interfaith, who have large immigrant populations, to advocate for immigration reform and improved police relations. Similarly, I am guessing that if you were to say yes to Eileen Nehme's call to serve as a mentor in the Communities in Schools program she is organizing, you would also find yourself connecting across cultural lines.

Before I go too deeply into the book's relevance to our individual and collective lives, however, let me walk us through the strategies anthropologist Steven Vertovec lays out for improving how we live in diverse communities. In some ways, this might be an extension of the prayer and meditation

we shared earlier. First, writes Warren St. John of Vertovec's three steps, "Rather than ignoring the various categories that distinguish individuals, [for instance, rather than trying to be "color blind"] one should instead consider *all* the categories an individual belongs to. A Liberian refugee might be a woman, a Christian, a worker, a single mother concerned about neighborhood crime and the safety of her children, and so on." St. John continues, "When you become aware of every affiliation a person has... broad categories break down and individuality emerges. The listing of every category a person might fit into renders any single category less meaningful." I would add, more specifically, that it might make any single category less powerful, and less frightening.

The next of Vertovec's suggested steps, says St. John, is for individuals to "recast themselves not in terms of their differences, but in terms of what they have common." Say, for

instance, you're standing in line behind a Salvadoran man at the grocery store, or an Iraqi woman, or a Sudanese teenager. Even better, say one of those people comes walking through the doors of Wildflower Church. If you categorize yourself and the other only, as St. John says, "according to race or place of origin," of course it's going to be challenging to find a connection. But all of you, all of us, are so much more than that, if we allow ourselves to look for the commonalities—maybe for instance, it's gender, family makeup, talents, vocation, age, or musical interests. To quote St. John, "perhaps most powerfully," maybe it's "a concern for [one's] immediate environment." With such common concern, there is newfound interest in working together, rather than against one another.

The third and final step Vertovec offers, according to St. John, is what Vertovec calls "mutual differentiation, an

acknowledgement of interdependence that takes into account various group identities. The idea,” writes St. John, “is not that everyone needs to be the same, but that members of various groups respect members of other groups to which they themselves might not belong.” Interdependence, respect... do you hear echoes of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles here?

Of course, it all sounds good. It all looks beautiful. I’ve returned dozens of times to that photo of Luma Mufleh’s soccer team that I showed the kids in *Time for All Ages*, just to admire the beauty of this diverse group of people. Still, every time I look at them, I need to remember, as the back cover blurb says, it took *unsentimental* compassion and *grueling* training sessions to get that team united in all its diversity. It took *discipline*.

Now, the word *discipline* comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which is also the root of the word *disciple*. To have discipline, in its original meaning, is to be a disciple receiving instruction. I won't be so pretentious as to claim myself to be a disciple of Martin Luther King, but I will say I believe him when he gives the instructions, printed on the cover of today's order of service, that "We must live together as brothers or perish together as fools." Sure, I'd update it to say "brothers and sisters," or simply "kin," but you get the general idea.

Now, returning to *Outcasts United*, and Clarkston, Georgia, another way to put King's message comes in the words of grocery store owner, Bill Mehlinger: "If you don't change," he says, "you're gone." Mehlinger knows this from direct experience. With white flight following the arrival of refugees in Clarkston, Mehlinger found his grocery store, Thriftown, on the verge of bankruptcy. It was only when one

his employees, a Vietnamese teenage refugee named Hong Diep Vo, suggested to him that he start stocking a wider variety of food, that Mehlinger began to see a turnaround. As a result, writes Warren St. John, “the shelves of Thriftown are a *mélange* of exotic breads, grains, candies, and produce... In the meat department, whole lamb and goat have replaced beef as a favorite, and most fish is sold whole.” How does Mehlinger know exactly what foods to stock? “Thirty-five of Thriftown’s forty-three employees are resettled refugees, from twenty different nations.”

Alongside the grocer’s story, St. John also writes of the Clarkston Baptist Church, established in 1883. Again, due to the increasing refugee population and the corresponding white flight, the church, in St. John’s words, “plummeted from around seven hundred [members] to just over a hundred. On Sundays, the pews sat mostly empty, and the church was on

the verge of going broke. It was then,” continues St. John, “that a group of church elders met to discuss the congregation’s future. They looked to the Bible for guidance, and read a passage in which Jesus described heaven as a place for people of all nations.”

Now, of course, it’s not that everyone right then and there agreed to try to make such a heaven on earth. Some people did choose to leave. But for those who wished to stay, they knew change was the only way. So, after 125 years of existence, the church’s name was changed to the Clarkston International Bible Church. Today, writes St. John, “immigrants and refugees from Togo, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Liberia, and Sudan, some in colorful native garb, worship alongside silver-haired white women in their Sunday best.” Says Pastor Phil Kitchin of this new and thriving religious community, “Jesus says heaven is a place for people

of all nations.... So if you don't like Clarkston, you won't like heaven."

Now, Wildflower Church, unlike the Clarkston International Bible Church, is not a Christian congregation, per se. I myself do not identify as Christian, though I respect many Christian teachings, and I honor that some of the beloved Wildflowers among us do identify as Christian. For some of us, I'm guessing mostly *former* Christians, the very word *Christian* can raise the hackles. Nevertheless, should *any* of us—whether Christian or Pagan or Atheist or Buddhist or plain and simple Unitarian Universalist—should any of us deny that heaven, or heaven on earth, whatever that may be to you, is a place for people of all nations, then I, along with Unitarian Universalist minister Kat Liu, question our call to be a prophetic church—and our claim to be deliberately inclusive.

Now, does my questioning, dare I say my doubt, feel to you like I am making “top-down” efforts to impose contact and understanding between the present members of Wildflower Church and those brothers and sisters, those kin, we have yet to know? If so, does such imposition make you want to jump up and reach out to Austin’s own people of all nations? Such questions are for you to explore in your own souls, and with one another. My job is to supply you with the questions, and with the opportunity to live into those questions.

Still, I believe Vertovec is right, that all my preaching will only take us so far. It’s up to you whether you will take refuge in discipline and diversity. It’s up to you, whether you will seek to join the Wildflower Austin Interfaith team in the work of immigration reform. It’s up to you, whether you will seek out Eileen Nehme after the service and ask her more about becoming a mentor to a child in need. It’s up to you to go out

and find a copy of *Outcasts United*, so you can read the story of the refugee youth soccer team I spoke more *around* today than *about*. It's up to you. But before you decide how much soul searching you're willing, or unwilling, to do, remember the words we shared earlier. "This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.// This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.... We do not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves." So may it be that we, in our little Wildflower patch of this earth, continue to strive to make this place a heavenly home for people of all nations.

Amen.

This Sunday's Second Offering will go to the Austin YWCA Generation YW program. Generation YW is a program that uses a strength-based approach designed to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors for youth, with a particular focus on adolescent girls.