

Celebrating Our Heritages and Our Universalism
Sunday, February 4, 2024
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Reading: The Price of Being Americanized by Michael Novak 1971

“My grandparents, I am sure, never guessed what it would cost them and their children to become ‘Americanized.’

“In their eyes, no doubt, almost everything was gain. From the oppression experienced by Slovaks at the hand of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the gain was liberty; from relative poverty, opportunity; from an old world, new hope. (There is a town in Pennsylvania, two hundred miles from where they now lie buried, called ‘New Hope.’

“They were injured, to be sure, by nativist American prejudices against foreigners, by a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, and even by an Irish church. (Any Catholic church not otherwise specified by nationality they experienced and described as ‘the Irish church’.)

“What price is exacted by America when into its maw it sucks other cultures of the world and processes them? What do people have to lose before they can qualify as true Americans?

“For one thing, a lot of blue stars – and silver and gold ones- must hang in the window. You proved you loved America by dying for it in its wars. The Poles, Italians, Greeks and Slavs whose acronym Msgr. Geno Baroni has made stand for all the non-English speaking ethnic groups- pride themselves on ‘fighting for America.’ When my father saw my youngest brother in officer’s uniform, it was one of the proudest days of his life...even though it (sickenly) meant Vietnam.

“I don’t have other figures at hand. But when the Poles were only four percent of the population (in 1917-19) they accounted for twelve percent of the nation’s casualties in World War I. ‘The Fighting Irish’ won their epithet by dying in droves in the Civil War.

“There is, then, a blood test. ‘Die for us and we’ll give you a chance.’

“One is also expected to give up one’s native language. My parents decided never to teach us Slovak. They hoped that thereby we would gain a generation in the process of becoming full Americans.

“They kept up a few traditions: Christmas Eve holy bread, candlelight, mushroom soup, fish, and poppyseed. My mother baked kolachy. Pirohi, however, more or less died with my grandmother, who used to work all day making huge steaming pots of potato dumplings and prune dumplings for her grandchildren. No other foods shall ever taste so sweet.

“My parents, so far as I know, were the first Slovaks in our town to move outside the neighborhoods traditional for our kind of people and move into the ‘American’ suburbs. There were not, I recall, very many other Catholics in the rather large, and good, public school I attended from grades two until six. I remember Mrs. S, the fifth grade teacher, spelling ‘Pope Pius’ with an ‘o’ in the middle, and myself with gentle firm righteousness (even then) correcting her.

“What has happened to my people since they came to this land nearly a century ago? Where are they now, that fully Americanized third generation? Are we living the dream our grandparents dreamed when on creaking decks they stood silent, afraid, hopeful at the sight of the Statue of Liberty? Will we ever find the secret relief, that door, that hidden entrance? Did our grandparents choose for us, and our posterity, what they should have chosen?

“Now the dice lie cold in our uncertain hands.”

When I was in elementary school, I was taught that America was a great melting pot that would homogenize us all into “Americans.” By the time I was in college I was told America was a salad or gumbo in which our various cultures enhanced each other.

Whether melting pot, salad or gumbo it seems there is always some who want to exclude some others. In Stephen Steinberg’s 1981 book [The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America](#) he says that, “According to the best available estimates, 61 percent of the white population of the United States in 1790 were of English descent, and another 17 percent were Scotch or Irish....as many as 99 percent...were Protestant.”

I am Pennsylvania Dutch or more accurately Pennsylvania German. Deutsch is the German word for German. My maternal grandfather’s family came to this country in the 1700s from the German Palatinate. In 1751 Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Why should the Palatine boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements, and by herding together, establish their language and manners, to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them?”

My friend Don, who comes from a large black West Virginia family knows what Michael Novak knows. He and, I believe, all of his brothers served in the military. While his family served in the mid to late twentieth century, “Of the veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, 35% are minorities, according to the data reviewed by CNN. Black veterans make up 15% of veterans who have served since then,” [Military data reveals dangerous reality for black service members and veterans | CNN Politics](#). Being willing to die is still a route many are trying to take to the American dream.

In America our religious communities are one of the prime places where heritage is celebrated. When I was growing up in Kochenderfer’s Evangelical United Brethren Church some of older men at the Sunday evening service would call out let’s sing a hymn in Deutsch and then a hymn would be sung in German. As part of my confirmation class the minister showed us the old German pulpit Bible from the church’s beginnings. Just out of seminary I served two United

Methodist churches near Hazleton, Pennsylvania. When I would drive into Hazelton to visit someone in the hospital, I noticed all the churches, many of them Roman Catholic. I asked why is there a Catholic church seemingly on every block? The answer. This one is Italian Catholic, this Irish Catholic, this one German Catholic, this one Polish Catholic. A few weeks back I went down to Tarpon Springs to play the tourist. I, of course, went to the Greek Orthodox church. I spoke to the custodian who told me various ways the Greek heritage of the community was celebrated there. Growing up one of my brother's best friend's family went to the Serbian Orthodox church. Being Serbian was celebrated there.

Many years ago, at another UU congregation I was saying something similar to this when I happened to catch the facial expression of one of the only Black people in the room. She was fairly new to the congregation, but I could see in her eyes that though our creedless stance was more in line with her way of thinking we were not her community. At another congregation one of the few African American members told me he thought Unitarian Universalists should have Black congregations. UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed in his book Black Pioneers in a White Denomination describes how a number of those who tried that got no support and quite some discouragement from the denomination.

But we are universalists. We say in our name we include everyone. How then can we also give people the opportunity to celebrate their unique traditions and heritages?

Sometimes it is as simple as giving people a venue in which to share. When I served as the interim minister at the UU congregation in Charleston, West Virginia I was told that the Iranian community of Charleston would lead a No Ruz, Iranian New Year, service each year and then share Iranian food with the congregation.

When I first came into Unitarian Universalism I did not understand that these were traditions for people to share and not ours to appropriate. I remember doing a Diwali service with no Indians in the room and a Kwanzaa service led totally by white UUs. I know better now.

Of course, sometimes things do blend. I remember going to a market in DC where one of the most popular food stands was the one selling Korean tacos. On a recommendation from one of you I recently watched the first few episodes of the TV show "Grace and Frankie." Two couples split as the husbands come out as gay and say they are in love with each other and want to leave their wives. One of the sons of one of the couples asks what will happen to their family's Jewish Christmas Eve. I had a blended family in a past congregation who decorated their Christmas tree with images of Hindu gods and goddesses. We do sometimes find ways to honor more than one heritage at a time.

Unitarian Universalism like America should not be a melting pot. We should not have to give up pieces of who we are to be here.

I have a painting given to me by a member of a congregation I served. It is signed Lydia Capek, but she told me that that was not her given name. Her parents had named her Ludmilla. An elementary teacher had declared that ugly, told her she was Lydia, and she had been Lydia ever

since. No one should get to rename you because they do not like or cannot pronounce your name.

I have made assumptions about people that were wrong. I did a marriage vow renewal ceremony for a Mexican American couple. The first time I met with them the husband arrived at my office first as he and his wife were both coming from work. We chatted for a while. I asked when his family had come to the States. He was second generation. I asked about his wife's family. With the Conquistadors. As some Mexican Americans say, they didn't cross the border, the border crossed them. When I assume something call me out on it.

I have not the slightest idea what I said anymore but I remember my high school chemistry teacher Mr. Levy calling me out on something I said that he told me was Anti-Semitic and hurtful. I didn't know. He treated me as an adult and told me. Tell me when I say something that hurts.

Our current Unitarian Universalist principles say that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The proposed revision to our bylaws says that pluralism is one of our values and that,

“We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

“We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.”

That means that sometimes we need to call each other back into community when we do something that either purposely or inadvertently puts someone else out. Our universalism should celebrate who we each are not amalgamize us.

And I would add we should stand up for one another. If someone is tormenting or threatening another because of the color of their skin, the slant of their eyes, who their dating or because they are wearing a yarmulka, a hijab or a keffiyeh, speaking in Sign, Spanish, Arabic, Pashtun, or Mandarin step in, make a call. Let's do what we can to keep everyone safe.

Inclusion strategist Vernā Myers says, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." Let us each do what we can to make Unitarian Universalism a place where everyone gets to dance.