

Contemplating Unity in Divisive Times

By Helen R. Weingarten



Illustration by Mary Gentry

Sometimes when I walk my dog, Desiree, around the lake by our house, I don't think about the morning news or my day's schedule; I don't replay last week's frustrating conversation with a colleague over and over again in my mind. Instead, I consciously choose to attend to what's happening around us. A pair of swans, circling high above the lake, suddenly veers directly over our heads towards an unknown destination. I watch a cluster of finches darting in and out of the shoreline brush until Desi, wanting some attention of her own, pulls on her leash to show me how great it is to sniff one fallen maple leaf after another. Because she refuses to budge from her leafy explorations to continue our walk, I finally kneel down next to her and scoop up a handful of leaves to sniff for myself – and only then does she willingly move on. Although, I'm not as captivated as she is by the smell of leaf mold, I must admit, if I follow her lead, I'm more likely to experience being an integral part of nature than if I insist she follow me.

For many of us, we feel most united with the web of life when we're in a beautiful landscape – either alone or with a beloved companion (animal or human). But, even then, it's not easy. Because our lives are filled with multiple responsibilities, we don't often find the time to engage in any activity with our whole minds and hearts. We stare at the night sky, appreciating why our ancestors prayed to the heavens, and in the next instant, our mind jumps to feeling guilty that we haven't called a friend back whose mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. We no longer see the North Star or the new moon, because from feeling guilty about not telephoning, our mind switches to feeling resentful – because we were busy at work, or picking up the kids from soccer practice, or trying to find a plumber, or all three – we didn't sit down to eat all day.

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So, for the first time in 24 hours we pay attention to that deep, hungry feeling inside ourselves. And what do we do next? Well, I'm likely to walk into the kitchen, take out the remaining Ben and Jerry's "Cherry Garcia," and settle in to finish the job. But, do I get to do this without interruption? Heck no – because instead of wanting to share the joys of leaf sniffing, my wonderful pooch, Desiree, now wants to share the joys of ice cream. . .and the last thing I want to do at this moment is share.

"Not wanting to share" evokes its own different reactions at different times as well. Sometimes, I see my honesty about what I want and my ability to set limits to be a good thing. At other times, it's accompanied by feelings of embarrassment over being "selfish."

Then, I comfort myself with remembering that even the great Mahatma Gandhi once admitted to an interviewer that it was easier to make peace with Britain than it was to make peace within him. And the Dalai Lama has said it's easier for him to love humanity as a whole than it is to practice loving kindness with the people he lives and works with every day.

I've learned how important it is to accept that nobody's perfect or always consistent. Even the term, "unity," isn't uniformly defined, I discovered as I prepared to clarify my thinking about what unity meant to me. When I did a Google search for "definitions of unity," in less than a second I discovered 60 various definitions which included: *agreement, consensus, harmony, homogeneity, interconnection, oneness, rapport, sameness, solidarity, uniformity, and wholeness*. This isn't just a question of semantics. Different definitions have different action implications. For example, if we think of "unity" as "sameness" we're likely to be frightened by individuality – our own and others – rather than respect its diverse forms. Understood as "wholeness," unity describes our most intimate relatedness. Being able to fully express who we are in the presence of another (and be accepted) is a central energizer of life.

Yet, the hard fact is that it's often easier to be "true" to oneself among acquaintances than it is among loved ones. We can walk away from an acquaintance who asks us to do something we don't want to do. Talking with a stranger or therapist or hairdresser lets us reveal our failings without having to change them. Commitments create accountability, and accountability creates conflict – because our wants and those of the people we care about aren't perfect fits. In our families, our marriages, and in our communities, we can't always meet our own needs and those of the people we care about, simultaneously.

Ironically, much of our current thinking about unity's complement, diversity, assumes that it's easier to be intimate with people of the same gender, religion, race, ethnicity, or nationality. And, to the extent that our expressions of self have been culturally molded, this assumption contains some truth. But it isn't the whole story. Much of the

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The dilemma we face in expressing who we are is that each of us has experienced the hurt of rejection. We're all guarded. We all have issues of trust. Fortunately, when we do experience being fully recognized and appreciated, many of us feel motivated to extend this to others. The Quaker educator, Parker Palmer, described community (at its best) as the kind of place where the person you most hoped to avoid is always sitting next to you, and you choose to remain in your seat.

Honoring united commitments to ourselves and to others requires acknowledging – first, differences exist. Second, reconciling our differences peacefully is harder than eliminating them by violence. And third, a yearning for unity which can be satisfied merely by belonging to a group – stifles dissent more frequently than it uncovers truth. Even a superficial knowledge of history demonstrates that people will willingly follow tyrants rather than face the fate suffered by those who challenge the status quo in the name of conscience.

Although, science now confirms what spiritual masters have been

Sunset on Matlacha Bay

The offshore fisherman cast and recast their lines oblivious to the scores of two-foot snook swimming along the shoreline. A pair of osprey, this year's perch bigger by three sticks from their morning efforts, nestle down together for the evening. The water gleams blue and fuchsia and gold. Midstream, a pod of manatee move in total silence, like the answer to a prayer I hadn't known I was asking. Shadowlike, they emerge for the briefest of moments, following the current home.

telling humanity throughout the ages: unity is a fact of life; regardless of the diversity of appearances, all forms of matter and energy are essentially unified – most of us are more familiar with yearning for unity than experiencing it. Each of us has struggled with conflicts between work and family, self and other. Each of us has been disappointed when our efforts to reconcile differences have been less successful than we hoped and buoyed when they have achieved results beyond our expectation. A poem I wrote a few years ago talks about how frequently what we hope to happen, doesn't. It addresses our inability to

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predict or control the range of outcomes of any of our actions; but it also speaks of hope emerging from the unlikeliest of circumstances – I call it Bell's Theorem after the Scottish physicist, John Bell, who developed the mathematical proof for Quantum Theory's assertion that all matter and energy in our galaxy is interdependent:

I'll be late getting to see my daughter
in Chicago tonight because a deranged man
is shooting people in the Dearborn post office
next to the Amtrak station.
A stranger's rage eddies through space
to cancelled dinner reservations
at Topolobampo for us and an earlier seating
for other hungry patrons – oblivious
to the circumstances leading to their luck,
And who can blame them?
The new physicists tell us
that the stroke of butterfly's wing in Borneo
changes weather patterns across the globe.
Given these conditions, can we ever know
the scope of our involvement – our complicity
in every atom's fate?
Making love in each other's arms last night,
did we cause today's global warming?
Are you and I responsible for the famine
in Somalia?
Death on a sun drenched Thursday in Michigan
eddies to a further question:
Can good come from the worst and suffering
from the best that we do?
In an interconnected universe, an act of kindness
becomes poetry and earthquake.
A cowbird's egg might save the world

Although we can't control the outcomes of our actions, we can decide what we put into them. Intentions don't guarantee results but they direct and shape behavior. Knowledge also helps. My husband, a skilled amateur photographer, has taught me, it's not enough to want to take a great nature photograph. In order to increase the likelihood of getting the results you hope for, it's necessary to understand and respect the interdependence of multiple conditions. Consider the spider web. First, spider webs are most clearly visible early in the morning when dew covered and backlit by the sun. Second, even if the lighting and humidity conditions are perfect, our normal body temperature creates a micro-climate between photographer and web that produce air currents which cause the web to tremble and the dew to evaporate. Third, even if you've done everything on your end to make taking a great photograph possible – you're awake early in the morning; you have a fast camera with a long lens, and you have enough film and patience to take multiple shots – you still can't control the weather.

Was it Quantum physics, or God, or merely coincidence that brought the people we cherish into our lives? "Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine," Humphrey Bogart's Rick says of his life changing meeting with Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa in that great movie of love and war, sacrifice and redemption – Casablanca. Every day, we have opportunities to turn chance encounters into meaningful relationships. We have opportunities to unite our individual energy and efforts with those of others, sniff leaves together, turn strangers into friends, and see where the universe takes us next.

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