

Building Belonging: Alignment over Agreement

By Lily Rappaport, Religious Education Transitions Consultant

Our religious values call us to embrace diversity in its many forms as a way to achieve unity and peace. In our communities, we strive to welcome, celebrate and honor diversity of people, beliefs and ideas. And yet, we often struggle with how to negotiate our differences especially when it comes to making decisions on behalf of our congregations.

As transitional religious professionals, we are uniquely positioned to provide inspired leadership and guidance to the congregations that we serve. This past year, in my role as the President of the Guild of Interim Religious Educators, I had the pleasure to collaborate with Rev. Patrice Curtis, the Transformational Interim Ministries Director at the Unitarian Universalist Association. In an effort to address one of the major challenges we face today: How can we support our denomination's long-term, theologically-based cultural and institutional change on issues of inclusion, equity, and diversity? How can we build a sense of belonging for all within our faith community and beyond?

Rev. Patrice and I formed a learning community of interim and transition professionals to explore and practice inclusion, equity, and diversity – both on a personal level as well as within each of our congregations' ministries. Using the Unitarian Universalist

Association's report "Widening the Circle of Concern," we developed a process of deep and intentional thoughtfulness to help members of the group grow in our abilities to guide our congregations to build a culture of greater inclusion, equity, and diversity. In our group's attempt to do the work of culture change – to live into anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural practices of the Beloved Community – we understood the most important lesson for the work is to begin with uncovering our own biases and to be open to new ways of being. It is ongoing work. It is hard work. It is messy work. There is often conflict that arises in our communities.

How do we resolve conflicts? For one, we covenant. In our covenants we make promises to each other – to keep us safe, to support loving and caring relationships. Covenants can build trust and teach us to walk together across disagreements. But how effective are these agreements in moving forward and in resolving conflicts? Are there other ways?

Yasuhiko Genku Kimura, a Japanese-born philosopher, intellectual, and Buddhist monk, uniquely integrates both western and eastern approaches to human philosophy. In his article, "Alignment Beyond Agreement," he offers a way to face and to resolve conflict. He suggests that when we face hard challenges, we focus on the alignment of our intentions rather than on the agreement of our opinions.

Kimura draws a very important distinction between congruence of intention and congruence of opinion: Alignment is congruence of intention, whereas agreement is congruence of opinion. (Note - In the realm of mathematics, “congruence” may be defined as “roughly the same size and shape.” The general definition of “congruence” is “compatibility.”)

“Opinion,” Kimura explains, “is a supposition elevated to the status of a conclusion held to be right but not substantiated by positive proof—rational or evidential.” He continues, “Alignment does not require agreement as a necessary condition. Alignment is congruence of intention in support of the attainment of a particular aim.”

Kimura states that alignment is more important than agreement. When it comes to making a plan, it may be important to hear everyone’s thoughts and opinions, but do so knowing that discussion will never generate 100% agreement. Getting to a place of alignment indicates buy-in, understanding, and commitment to move forward on the chosen path. It also means your team understands the goals and purpose and is agreeing that working towards meeting those is best for everyone.

So, what if we focus on our intentions rather than our opinions? The question, then, is not who is right but, instead, what is best for the fulfillment of our aims and intentions?

Being aligned with others' ideas doesn't mean everyone on a team must agree with each other. You can be aligned about the need to get a job or task done, while also disagreeing with how the job is being done. Just because there's disagreement doesn't mean we can't get aligned on what matters most and how to move forward.

Conceptually, alignment beyond agreement is very simple; alignment is a congruence of intention and intention becomes intent through discussion and communication. Opinions are different – and we can actually harness the disagreement into making the diversity of ideas into a dynamic evolutionary force

The problem is this: People do not know what their intentions are... So before we align in our intentions, we each need to know honestly what our intentions are. For instance, someone might say, “I am for liberty, freedom,” but when you really start to engage them in conversation, you realize that that is not really the person’s intention. Most people prefer safety over freedom. They are willing to give up their freedom for safety. And they become enslaved by the system that promises them safety. There is nothing wrong with wanting to have safety. But if your number one intention is safety, do not come to a group that is aligned in the intention to achieve greater freedom.

Kimura states that inherent in alignment is “the spirit of quest generating open and evolving dialogue and the exploration of choices which can be altered or discarded

along the way.” Diversity of ideas, united in a shared intention, can enrich the process of reaching a desired end and transcend the stronghold of individual opinions. Indeed, in “the spirit of quest” there is a collective intelligence and wisdom which can produce results beyond any one individual’s thinking. This can lead individuals beyond the boundary of their own thinking and break down the barriers put up in defense of their ideas.

REFERENCES:

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