

## Are We Still Searching for the Granfalloon?

Rev. Kate Rohde

When we celebrate the birth of a baby, we celebrate the beginning. But the beginning of what? For life was there nestled inside mother months before birth, and years ago the cells that joined together to create that life were living cells, part of the people who became parents.

Birth is the first separation. Now I am a separate being, not a part of another, my mother. I am born. I am me. I am separate, unique, different.

What must it have been like to be pushed suddenly from the warm, wet darkness where our every need was instantly satisfied, out into the world of light and chill – cut forever from that being that gave us life? Myth has it that our first yell is a yell of protest as air enters the lungs and we become part of the world. There is another myth that says there are some few souls who can't wait to be born, who would, if they could, leap from womb to world, and whose first cry is a cry of joy. But the skeptic in me doubts that story – I see so few human souls who choose challenge over comfort, few who joy in the frightening edge.

Yet perhaps I am wrong. It is scarcely parental prodding that makes the child begin to move on her own, to take his first step, to tell us "no" with most emphatic diction, to separate further and further from her family to become a more distinct, different, human personality. God knows it is scarcely parental prodding behind our teenager's drive toward separation, his efforts to be different in every aspect from his parents, to separate himself from familial expectation. Perhaps there *is* that within us which drives us towards the differentiation of maturity, the adventure of *becoming*, even when that becoming means leaving the comforts of familiarity. Perhaps there *is* something pushing us toward a joyful birth.

Most of us would probably not be here in a Unitarian Universalist church this morning if we did not have something within us that wished to joyfully birth and lovingly nurture our own individual uniqueness. If we wished to be comfortable and undistinguished, we probably would not have come to an oddball faith which so constantly preaches the value of diversity. Unitarian Universalism is based on the philosophy that human diversity is something to be embraced, not feared. And during the last three decades I have often found a remarkable openness among us. In many congregations I have served we have heard hardworking humanists, dedicated deists, convinced Christians, and passionate pagans with a willingness to consider what we heard.

Still, truth to tell, most of us tend to search for the granfalloon – trivial similarities which reassure us we are not different but part of an embracing whole connected to "Mom". It's comforting to know there are others like us, that we can immerse ourselves in the safety of "our" group and never have to deal with that fear that some differences seem to invoke for us. I have to admit that a lot of UU's say we come to church looking for people who think like we do – and we often don't just mean that we have a similar approach, we often mean that we hold similar prejudices and preferences. We tend to cluster in certain demographic enclaves of people of similar age or ethnicity or profession or such like.

At some level, difference *is* a threat to each of us. Other beings have needs different from my own – the competition is threatening. Other beings have power to shape my world – my sense of autonomy is threatened. Other beings see, understand, and act differently – my mind and senses are in question.

We have all experienced that knot of fear in the stomach, that feeling of threat. Sometimes that threat may be real. Two people want something that only one can have, one person's desire may mean harm to me, your needs may conflict with my needs. More often, however, differences evoke a gut level feeling of fear the origins of which we cannot identify. Think for a moment of ideas or persons or ways of doing things that you tend to draw away from, things that make you squirm in your seat when you see or hear them. Why do you fear them? Or if fear is not the right word, why do you feel so strongly about that difference?

Most of us, especially of a certain age, were brought up in times more racist, more sexist, and more homophobic than our own. As a kid, many of the cartoons on TV and many of the children's books I read were so offensively racist that they would not be tolerated by almost anyone today. Children my age were programmed by the media to view black people as savages, or as ignorant and foolish. I was fortunate to have had the counter-programming by family, friends, and church, and to have had many life experiences which helped counter the racist programming of the general culture, but it took a good deal of conviction and work by me, by people I knew, and by the culture at large to bring me and people with my experiences to a place where we overcame that programming. Similarly, I had to overcome homophobic and sexist programming. I dare say though, as hard as we may have worked, there is always more to learn in overcoming our fears of "difference," even when *we* are the different person.

Think, for example, how hard it is to accept differences even in trivial things. Housework, for instance. I wager almost every single one of you has lived with someone who either thought you were a lazy slob or an obsessive compulsive neat freak. Some of us have been called both, depending on the vantage point of the roommate. Although I am clearly more of an Oscar Madison than a Felix Unger, I have had more than one roommate who thought I was too fussy. When there is a huge difference, people will start throwing up morality: "My way is the way of the decent, moral people; your way is the way of the degenerates." Perhaps that is why I lived alone for 25 years before remarrying! So if *housework* can quickly become a moral issue, you can understand more easily why *nations* can't live in peace!

Many marriages go aground on such issues – not so much the issues themselves as the sense that being different is being bad, crazy, or unloving. Family therapist Virginia Satir has told us that the ability to tolerate difference and not to make it into a moral issue is a primary prerequisite for a healthy family. It is my opinion that it is also the prerequisite for a peaceful world. It certainly is necessary for a healthy congregation.

Yet we still tend to search for the granfalloon. We tend to build communities of people who don't differ greatly from ourselves. There are millions of people in North America who have never had a serious conversation with a person with a different religion, race, ethnicity, or

political point of view. In my first job out of college, I was a nursery school teacher on a staff where I was the only European American. Part of my job was to help an older African-American janitor put away the children's cots after their afternoon nap. Every day as we worked we talked. After many weeks he said to me, "You know, when I was coming up, white and black never socialized together. You are the first white woman I have ever talked to like this." I was both grateful and sad at this admission, and indeed although for me it was not the only such experience I had ever had, it was a rare one then. Rarer still because we also came from different parts of the country, were more than a generation apart, and had widely different education.

The media talks about lifestyle communities: the more and more common practice of people of similar income, age, race, marital status, affectional orientation and family alignment forming their own, separate communities. How many of our children go through their days without seeing any older people? How many go through their growing up years without getting to know anyone very different from their parents and themselves? We like to think of our churches as diverse, but, if you look at our demographics, we are remarkably homogenous. For me, as it must be for any UU who takes seriously our faith's call for pluralism, it is an important spiritual problem.

There is certainly a part of me that really enjoys being around people like myself, people who share my point of view, have experienced similar experiences, speak the same language, love similar things. Still, though I may feel a bit scared or intimidated by what is strange to me, I learn the most in my relationships with people very different from myself. They have had more to teach me. I learned more from the prisoners I worked with in a Georgia prison or the peasants I lived with in El Salvador than I have from other liberal, white, educated Americans. The experiences that challenged and changed my life have been interacting with people who showed me a very different way to see the world, through the lens of their experience.

I can still feel threatened by differences. My head knows better, but I still get that sort of knot in the stomach sometimes; I still squirm in my seat. And it is not just fundamentalist preachers who say I and my kind are bound for hell, nor racists and bigots, that make my stomach turn around. Sometimes it is perfectly nice people who are good and faithful UUs or who listen to NPR and support human rights. Something in us has not accepted the fact that two quite different ideas or persons can exist and both can be good. We are uncertain of ourselves. We feel we have to deny the validity of the other to create our own identity.

How many Unitarians does it take to screw in a light bulb? None. Unitarians don't use light bulbs because the Baptists use light bulbs in their church. Many times we Unitarians fall into the trap of defining ourselves negatively, creating our identity by putting other religions down. We have also done that within the movement.

The scientific positivists have suggested that mystical theists were "un-Unitarian" and ought to leave the church, "I don't see why they are Unitarians – they might as well be Baptists if they think like that!" while some of the more theistic among us have called the small, lecture-oriented, fellowships "Christ-hating savages" and suggested they become ethical culture societies. Lots of us have stories like I do of bringing a friend to a UU gathering, hoping to

pique their interest, only to have a fellow UU make some scathing comment about Catholics or Baptists or Christians and offend our friend with their animus. It is scarcely a great modeling of the pluralistic tolerance we affirm!

Admittedly I have been to UU congregations where there appears to be a reigning dogma and those who question it are seen as "Un-Unitarian," but that experience is rarer these days. Still it is important to be extremely aware that we Unitarians are under the same temptation as everyone else to favor diversity and minority opinions as long as *we* are in the minority – like the Southern Baptists who were among the strongest advocates of separation of church and state until a few decades ago when they found themselves in the majority in many areas.

If you look in this month's *UU World* you will see the fascinating story about All Souls Tulsa Unitarian Church getting the gift of diversity that we say we wish for, and its struggle. Our church in Tulsa has been large and thriving for many decades in a town that was the home base for Oral Roberts and his fundamentalist empire. In Tulsa there was an African American preacher, Carlton Pierson, who founded one of the most popular mega-churches in the country, a black pentacostal church. He was very close to Roberts, sometimes known as his "black son". But a few years ago, Pierson had a revelation. He stopped believing that a good God would send non-Christians to hell. He became a 19<sup>th</sup> century style Universalist.

To make a long story short, his church imploded, his fundamentalist friends rejected him, and the several hundred members who stayed with him ended up joining him at All Souls Tulsa which offered them space to worship. In the space of a few months it was decided to merge the two congregations, creating two services – one with the music All Souls had always had, and the other with music more in the tradition the African-American newcomers were accustomed to. For years, UU's all over the country had said we hoped for a more racially and culturally diverse congregation, yet when it happened as a wonderful gift in Tulsa it was a struggle for many members. Many, many were excited and gratified and took it as a wonderful opportunity to become the kind of congregation many dream of, but many also went to the minister in tears, upset for reasons they couldn't really articulate. Even though one service had not changed at all, they were terribly upset that the other service was so different. People waving their hands, spirited music – it didn't seem UU to them, although they couldn't exactly say why. They were upset, and somewhat embarrassed to be upset. Being open, being pluralistic, being diverse brings change and challenge. We leave our comfort zone. We have to be willing to be uncomfortable for a while. It is the spiritual challenge of UUism that we sometimes fail.

When I look for *pluralistic* images, many different ones come to mind. In the Old Testament is the story of Noah's ark where God tells Noah that he wants all different kinds of birds and animals brought on board. He needs diversity in creation.

I have an image of the Jesus who befriended the rich and the poor, fishermen, tax collectors, children, women, and even prostitutes, a man who modeled a radical openness to human diversity that shocked not only his detractors but also his followers. He lived in a time of purity codes, and his radical hospitality included even those whom others believed were unclean.

I have the Canadian image, not the American metaphor of the melting pot, but rather their image is of a great mosaic in which the many colors, shapes, and textures come together to make a beautiful picture, yet with each piece unique.

How different those images are from Vonnegut's Hazel Crosby, who spends her life looking for Hoosiers. The UU way is to value exploration of differences; Hazel's way is to seek confirmation through sameness. The first is the seeking of life's abundance, while the last is an attempt to confirm one's own tiny existence through trivial connections.

I fear the Hazels of the world and the Hazel-like parts of myself that are too fearful or lazy to reach beyond what is familiar and comfortable and trivial to find connections that are deep and meaningful. I fear missing my true karass because I have been searching for the granfalloon. While we all need the comforts of home on occasion, it is spiritual death to shield ourselves from what is Other.

The beauty of others enhances rather than lessens our own. I saw that one day very suddenly. I had been living in a part of the country with a pretty homogenous view of how women should look. At the pool or at the tennis courts it was extremely unusual to see women who were over 30 or weighed over 120 pounds – a bit like the Stepford Wives. Visiting in Oregon, I went to a pool there. The locker room had benches and lockers and showers, and a collage of women and girls. They ranged in age from 5 to 85. They were skinny and obese and everywhere in between. They were different colors, some were pregnant, some had babes in their arms, many had wrinkles and sags. Some had scars, one had had her breasts removed. They were bending, standing, sitting, showering, walking. It was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen. Each woman's uniqueness lent beauty to the others – a living picture of the breadth of feminine humanity.

The Unitarian Universalist ideal is a unity which celebrates diversity. It is not the false unity in which each must give up individual ideas and interesting differences in order to conform to the group norm. Nor is it the rugged individualism where one can exist only apart from or even in opposition to others. We seek to affirm ourselves, yet at the same time to search out the depth and possibilities that an openness to others offers, that our lives might be enhanced and even changed in those relationships – seeking to be born not once, nor twice, but finding the self born into a new world again and again and again.

The ideal is a hospitality which not only welcomes the stranger but is open to being challenged and changed. When we open our hearts and our congregation to those we do not know, to people that we may not expect, then our spiritual community will become deeper and wider and an even more precious opportunity for rebirth.

Two readings from Cat's Cradle written by Kurt Vonnegut accompany this sermon.

### Reading 1:

#### Chapter 2

#### Nice, Nice, Very Nice

“If you find your life tangled up with somebody else’s life for no very logical reasons,” writes Bokonon, “that person may be a member of your *karass*.”

At another point in *The Books of Bokonon* he tells us, “Man created the checkerboard; God created the *karass*.” By that he means that a *karass* ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial and class boundaries.

It is a free-form as an amoeba.

In his “Fifty-third Calypso,” Bokonon invite us to sing along with him:

Oh, a sleeping drunkard  
Up in Central Park,  
And a lion-hunter  
In the jungle dark,  
And a Chinese dentist,  
And a British queen –  
All fit together  
In the same machine.  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice –  
So many different people  
In the same device.

### Reading 2:

#### Chapter 42

#### Bicycles for Afghanistan

There was a small saloon in the rear of the plane and I repaired there for a drink. It was there that I met another fellow American, H. Lowe Crosby of Evanston, Illinois, and his wife, Hazel.

They were heavy people, in their fifties. They spoke twangingly. Crosby told me that he owned a bicycle factory in Chicago, that he had had nothing but ingratitude from his employees. He was to move his business to grateful San Lorenzo.

“You know San Lorenzo well?” I asked.

“This’ll be the first time I’ve ever seen it, but everything I’ve heard about it I like,” said H. Lowe Crosby. “They’ve got discipline. They’ve got something you can count on from one year to the next. They don’t have the government encouraging everybody to be some kind of original pissant nobody ever heard of before.”

“Sir?”

“Christ, back in Chicago, we don’t make bicycles any more. It’s all human relations now. The eggheads sit around trying to figure out new ways for everybody to be happy. Nobody can get fired, no matter what; and if somebody does accidentally make a bicycle, the union accuses us of cruel and inhuman practices and the government confiscates the bicycle for back taxes and gives it to a blind man in Afghanistan.

“And you think things will be better in San Lorenzo?”

“I know damn well they will be. The people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense!”

Crosby asked me what my name was and what my business was. I told him, and his wife Hazel recognized my name as an Indiana name. She was from Indiana, too.

“My God,” she said, “are you a *Hoosier*.”

I admitted I was.

“I’m a Hoosier, too,” she crowed. Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I never knew anybody who was.”

“Hoosiers do all right. Lowe and I’ve been around the world twice, and everywhere we went we found Hoosiers in charge of everything.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“You know the manager of that new hotel in Istanbul?”

“No.”

He’s a Hoosier. And the military-whatever-he-is in Tokyo...”

“Attaché,” said her husband.

“He’s a Hoosier,” said Hazel. “And the new Ambassador to Yugoslavia...”

“A Hoosier?” I asked.

“Not only him, but the Hollywood Editor of *Life* magazine, too. And that man in Chile...”

“A Hoosier, too?”

“You can’t go anywhere a *Hoosier* hasn’t made his mark,” she said.

“The man who wrote *Ben Hur* was a Hoosier.”

“And James Whitcomb Riley.”

“Are you from Indiana, too?” I asked her husband.

“Nope. I’m a Prairie Stater. ‘Land of Lincoln’ as they say.”

“As far as that goes,” said Hazel triumphantly, “Lincoln was a Hoosier, too. He grew up in Spencer County.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I don’t know what it is about Hoosiers,” said Hazel, “but they’ve sure got something. If somebody was to make a list, they’d be amazed.”

“That’s true,” I said.

She grasped me firmly by my arm. “We Hoosiers got to stick together.”

“Right.”

“You can call me ‘Mom.’”

“What?” *Mom*

“Whenever I meet a young Hoosier, I tell them, ‘You can call me.’”

“Uh huh.”

“Let me hear you say it,” she urged.

“Mom?”

She smiled and let go of my arm. Some piece of clockwork had completed its cycle. My calling Hazel “Mom” had shut it off, and now Hazel was rewinding it for the next Hoosier to come along.

Hazel’s obsession with Hoosiers around the world was a textbook example of a false *karass*, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done, a textbook example of what Bokonon calls a *granfallon*. Other examples of *granfalloons* are the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows – and any nation, anytime, anywhere.

As Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

If you wish to study a granfalloon,  
Just remove the skin of a toy balloon.