

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
February 8, 2009**

The Sum of Our Parts

by Donne Hayden

In 1986 along with fifty other high school teachers, I was part of a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at Colorado State University. For five weeks that summer, from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., five days a week, we studied the art, literature, history and philosophy of India and China. Needless to say, we barely scratched the surface.

Each discipline was taught by a different university professor, and I was most captivated by the sessions on philosophy taught by Dr. Jim Boyd, who had spent a great deal of time in India. When he taught us about Hinduism, he told a story to point out a difference between Hinduism and Christianity. It went like this:

When a Christian comes to India, he asks, “What religion are you?”

When the Indian answers, “I’m Hindu,” the Christian responds, “Oh, I see. Have you heard the good news about Jesus? Do you know that believing in him will save your soul? I’m a Christian.”

To which the Indian replies, “Good for you! Be the *best* Christian you can be.”

Not to belabor the point, but inherent in our Western tradition is trying to change the other person to be like we are, to get him/her on our path, while the Hindu simply acknowledges, “You are on a spiritual path—good for you!”

In terms of valuing all spiritual paths, we can learn a great deal by comparing the judgmental way of thinking in Jewish-Christian traditions with the more tolerant way of Hinduism. In his book, *World Religions*, Huston Smith quotes the 19th century “orientalist,” Max Muller who said:

If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions to some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India.

*And if I were to ask myself from what literature we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life, again I should point to India.*¹

Essentially, Hinduism recognizes that people are different. Not only do they differ in temperament and talents, they have different “stations” or status in life and are at different stages of life, all of which affects the way they seek and express spirituality. Hinduism has a different understanding of the Absolute, but for simplicity’s sake, we can say that all spiritual paths lead toward what we in the West call God. Smith identifies four “ways” to be on a spiritual path. “The Way to God through Knowledge” leads one to a life of study and reflection; “The Way to God through Love” leads one to a life of prayer and devotion; “The Way to God through Work” leads to a life of active service; and “The Way to God through Willed Introversion” (think extreme asceticism) leads to a life of what Smith calls “psychophysical exercises” seeking to “Reintegrate the Beyond Within.” To the Hindu, no path is superior to the others. According to Dr. Paul Alan Laughlin in his book *Getting Oriented, Hindus*

have always recognized not just the existence of many valid spiritual paths, but indeed the necessity of them. In this regard, Hinduism acknowledges the obvious: all people are not the same in psychological makeup, disposition, temperament, and tastes; and therefore no one spiritual path or style could possibly be right for everyone.

...

... people will be drawn to different spiritual paths depending on their individual dispositions or natures. Each of these paths thus has its own integrity and validity, and none of them is regarded as better than the others . . .

While as Quakers we value unity in our spiritual community, it is important to recognize the difference between unity and uniformity. Narrowing the acceptable “ways to God” to only

¹ Huston Smith, *World Religions*, page 17.

one or two paths can result in not much actually getting done; in fact, focusing on only one way can actually lead to the decline of a faith community.

I saw an example of this when, after researching the 200-year history of a Quaker meeting in West Elkton, Ohio, I understood that over time, in the process of seeking unity, the Meeting had preferred uniformity. The first settlers came in 1804 and worked together to establish new homes; they were united in action but not uniform in spiritual understanding. In the late 1820's, the now-established congregation was split by theological differences—those who followed Elias Hicks were determined to keep to the original Quaker principles of waiting on the Lord in Silence and perceiving Jesus as the Inner Guide, focusing more on his life and teachings than on his death. For these Quakers, the Holy Spirit could and did speak to each person, constantly revealing truth to individuals. The other faction, swayed by the evangelical movement from England, also kept the Quaker practices of open worship, but they began to put more emphasis on the authority of Scripture; for them, leadings of the Spirit became subservient to the Bible. They were called “Orthodox” by the Hicksite Friends, not in a particularly Friendly way. At West Elkton, the Hicksites left the meeting, eventually moving away or joining other Hicksite meetings.

For the next fifteen years or so, the meeting was united theologically, but not uniform in its response to the question of what to do about slavery. Though all Quakers opposed slavery, some resisted breaking the law of the land by helping fugitive slaves. In West Elkton, most in the meeting favored slow, legal change while others in the meeting were leaders in the Underground Railroad helping fugitives reach freedom in Canada.

In the 1841, Indiana Yearly Meeting split over the issue of abolition. In West Elkton, the meeting split again as the most outspoken Anti-Slavery Friends left the meeting to form their own monthly meeting and join Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends.

Over the next ten years and certainly by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, even the most hesitant and conservative Quakers understood they must actively oppose slavery, and many Anti-Slavery Friends quietly returned to the regular Orthodox meetings. In some

cases, however, the rift was too deep, the wounds too painful, and some of the most active Friends who had left the meeting also left the faith. When all those with strong opinions on opposing sides (first the Hicksites, then some anti-slavery Friends) left the meeting to a group who all held similar opinions, the meeting lost energy. After the Civil War not much happened in the meeting for the next 100 years or so. Some people might call such uniform unity “peace,” but to me it has more a sense of stagnation.

This past week in the Ministry and Counsel meeting, I had the opportunity to read the responses to the recent Congregational Survey (Barbara Adams Marin will be talking more about this during Meeting for Business today and you will all have the opportunity to read the survey responses, by the way). The survey results show a strong central purpose and preferences in the congregation, with a few folks expressing preferences on one side or the other of the bulge in the Bell-curve. For instance, some are highly motivated by community service, others by exploring and developing spirituality. When we discuss the results of the survey, I hope you will keep in mind that the most effective communities are diverse systems. When the West Elkton meeting became fairly uniform in the make-up of its congregation, the Meeting stopped growing. “Uni-form” means obviously, “one form.” One would think, perhaps, that having a group of all the same form would be a good and valuable thing. In faith communities, however, uniformity results in the whole being *less* than the sum of its parts.

To maintain a vibrant faith community, we must value each other in our differences. Differences are what keep us alive, energized, motivated, active, changing, and growing. We need all of us to be whole. In a *diverse* faith community, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.