

Hidden Diversities – Rev. Doug McCusker

All my life, I've struggled with my ethnic identity. Half of me is Colombian from my mother. But I grew up in a part of the country that was dominated by people with Northern European heritage. I have that also, on my father's side. That's the part that sort of took over. My name is Douglas Edward McCusker; not very Latino, even though my mother's name was Araminta Colmenares Mora. Plus, look at me, I don't fit the standard mold of a Latino. I have real pale skin and none of the indigenous features common throughout South America. The Colombian inside of me could easily hide undetected unless I chose to reveal it.

Dorothy Spoerl, one of our most influential Unitarian Universalist religious educators, wrote that children begin to develop the foundations of their identity long before they can consciously reason about it. It forms when the infant first dimly comprehends a distinction between "me" and "not me." It proceeds by a further process of differentiation where more and more distinctions are slowly clarified. Each additional differentiation from one's environment strengthens the sense of self and who the self is. She writes, "As each concept is formed it is first a name, then a fuller concept, and as the individual lives with it longer there accrues to it the beliefs, customs, mythologies, and value judgments that accompany the term."

In 1956, my father's job was relocated to Richmond, Virginia where I was born 2 years later. My mother was one of only two Colombians in Richmond. The other became her best friend and my godmother. There weren't many Hispanics from other countries there either. Richmond of the 1960's revolved around a simplistic black-white axis. My mom was swept into the dominant white category because of her light skin. My dad was a German-Irish white man, so in the milieu of the South, I identified myself as white or Caucasian as it was called.

But that didn't mean that my Hispanic heritage was lost. My grandmother lived with us when I was little so I learned Spanish and heard many stories of a far-away place where they grew coffee, played strange musical instruments and had animals like alpacas and monkeys. We ate plantains, yucca and paella at home. I saw pictures of my uncles and cousins who I hoped to meet someday.

By the time I was a teenager, there were enough Hispanic families in Richmond that a lively community developed, primarily around the Catholic Church. They were professionals and some of the early refugees from the civil unrest in Central America.

Araminta was one of the matriarchs. Whenever we got together for Spanish Mass or for a fiesta, the energy in the room was filled with joy and celebration. My cousin Sonia, who was my age, came from Colombia to live with us during my senior year of high school. We developed a great friendship. She taught me many things about Latin culture such as how to dance the Salsa and Cumbia.

The next year I was off to college at a predominantly white school, and then a professional career in a huge bureaucracy where white European-American males dominated all the positions of power. I got married, had a child and settled down to my little box in the white suburbs.

I don't think I ever consciously downplayed my Colombian roots, but because of how I was perceived, and of course the attendant privileges that came along with it, being white of European descent dominated my racial and ethnic identity.

In my case I had relegated my Hispanic heritage to a secondary status without thinking that much about it. It feels more like an homage to my mother more than an integral part of who I am. But depending on the situation, cultural pressures can cause us to hide a part of our identity in the proverbial closet.

I have a vivid memory of being in kindergarten and learning about directions. That's because I was confronted with an invisible obstacle that I didn't understand. For the life of me, I couldn't get my directions straight. When I meant left, I'd say right or point in the wrong direction, and vice versa with my rights. I learned a coping trick to associate the playground with my left and the hallway with my right. Of course, that only worked when I was in the classroom.

I remember hating the etch-a-sketch toy because my brain was thinking that I wanted the ink to go to the left but I turned the dial to the right. My drawings looked like a jumbled mess.

As I grew up, it was an embarrassment so I kept it a secret. Only people real close to me knew about it. I almost caused several car accidents by telling my wife "turn left, no, no turn right!"

It's ironic that I became a professional cartographer. Maybe I didn't know my left from my right, but I knew how to make maps. One day I was in a management class learning about how to give people clear instructions. The teacher randomly called me up to the front and told me to turn around with my back facing the class. Then she gave me a complicated drawing with a bunch of lines going all over the place. My task was to guide everyone to draw the same figure on their own pieces of paper with only verbal instructions.

This was torture. I got real nervous and totally botched my lefts from my rights. People got so frustrated, I could hear them grumbling behind me. I was so embarrassed I felt like crying in front of my peers. I finally gave up, turned around, and walked out of the closet. I told them about my hidden learning disability and then took my seat shaking.

During the break, a classmate confided in me that she had the same disability. She called it spatial dyslexia. She said millions of people have it. You have no idea how liberating that was. There was nothing wrong with me. I was just wired a little differently than others. My dyslexia did not diminish who I was.

Ash Beckham gave a widely-viewed TED talk a couple of years ago, entitled *We're All Hiding Something, Let's Find the Courage to Open Up*. In the video, she made the point that we all have our own closets where we think we are playing it safe, but in reality, it is eating us up inside.

Closets are hard conversations about ourselves that we are afraid to have because of the reaction that we expect from others. Maybe it's declaring one's sexual orientation, or revealing a secret about one's past. Closets make us feel safe, but they are no place to live. She likens coming out of a closet like a grenade toss. If you don't throw it, it will kill you.

This is hard stuff, particularly where there is no legal protection against discrimination. Before the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy was reversed, coming out about one's sexual orientation could have meant the end of one's military career. In many states, including here in Virginia, it is still legal to discriminate against LGBT people in

the workplace. Mental challenges and learning disabilities still carry stigma in society. Ex-offenders are cautious about revealing their past lest they be judged all over again.

Coming out of a closet, changes things and it carries real consequences. But it may also reveal the real love and support that people have for us. Bringing one's real self out into the world carries risks and rewards. Only you know when it is right to reveal your hidden diversities and how to have those hard conversations.

Beckham offers these three principles for coming out of one's closet. First, be authentic. Take off your mask and be real. And of course, be ready for a real reaction in return. Second, just say it, don't be ambiguous. Don't say I think I might be gay or I might be an alcoholic. Just rip the band aid off. It may cause pain, but fresh air heals the spirit. Third and most importantly, be unapologetic. Never apologize for speaking your truth. You can apologize for your behavior, but never for being who you are.

Though it might be hard to believe, it took me a while before I could tell my co-workers that I was studying to become a minister. Here in this environment, ministers are accepted. But out in public, wearing your religion on your sleeve takes conviction and courage. I imagined that people would see me as a religious fanatic. I was taught that religion was one of those things you didn't bring up in polite company. Of course, that was the baggage in my closet being projected onto others.

I've talked from this pulpit before about how hard it is to carry your burdens alone and how ultimately futile it is. To quote Ash Beckham, "You are bigger than your closet, and we need you out here. All of you." Being honest with oneself and with others about who we are is essential to living a healthy spiritual life. It is also essential for a community to accept and embrace the diversity that all its members bring.

Conformity is a human cultural construct that is often born out of fear rather than acceptance of our differences. In some situations, standardization makes perfect sense. But when it comes to the complexity of humanity, we lose far more than we gain by driving our diversity underground. In nature, of which we are all a part, diversity is the key to sustainability and survival.

One of the most devastating examples of monocultural conformity was the Irish potato famine of 1846. For many reasons including unequal land distribution and economic exploitation, the Irish people came to depend on one kind of potato, the Lumper, for their diet and agricultural livelihood. The Lumper had no resistance to the wind born fungus that ravaged the fields literally overnight. Ireland's population was decimated: one in every eight Irishmen – a million people – died of starvation in three years; thousands of others went blind or insane for lack of the vitamins potatoes had supplied. Within a decade, Ireland's population was cut in half and the composition of America's population permanently altered.

My great grandfather, Patrick McCusker, was one of the lucky ones to escape the misery. He came to America, and here I am. Initially, the Irish were not welcomed here in America. They were treated with scorn and discrimination until subsequent generations melted into the stew of the dominant white European-American culture.

Today's immigrants to America are predominantly from Latin America, Asia and Africa bearing with them skin colors, religions, customs and values that are very different from previous European immigrants.

Rather than a melting pot of assimilation, we must be willing to embrace a salad bar of acculturation in which we accept and adapt to the diverse cultural influences that

each person brings. In the marketplace, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and congregations we must open ourselves to the vibrant exchange of cultures and diverse world perspectives so the full depth of humanity can flourish.

It starts with opening our eyes and seeing each other through our connections rather than our separation; embracing our differences and noticing each other for who we truly are. There will always be a tension between conformity and diversity. Right at the balancing point where the two forces complement each other is UNITY. The apostle Paul of Tarsus captured it so well in his first letter to the Corinthians Chapter 12.

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?”

Paul is emphatic that even though the body is a single unit it has many members with diverse gifts that contribute to the smooth functioning of the whole. If every member were the same, it would be uniform and singular but not unified, because true unity requires diversity. Any community that honors diversity is acting in harmony with the spirit of life and the natural way of the universe.

We are all honored members of the greater body of humanity with special, unique gifts to offer. Today you are you, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You. So, give us all of You so that we may be We; a stronger Us than just one Me.