

Title: Our Unexplored Truths: DEI, Dialogue, and the Deep Work of Democracy
Presented by Bob Parks and Angela Zhang (alternating)

Introduction:

[Bob]

Today, we want to open a space for conversations about **who we are, what divides us, and how we might find deeper unity** by exploring together how we look at the world. This sermon is broadly about what words mean; but also how words mean. Words are abstractions, and often these abstractions are rootless, open to manipulation. But words can also take root and live in a community, through dialogue. We focus today on DEI - specifically the words “diversity”, “equity” and “inclusion” – but also on the word “equality”, with a final note on “democracy”.

1. Diversity and Inclusion

[Angela]

A story to begin:

Let me start with a story about how words can create labels where none are needed And these labels can become traps.

In the spring of 2017, some UU RE directors called for a UU White Supremacy Teach-in. Hundreds of UU congregations responded, and the reaction eventually formed a wave of collective reflection on the idea of “white supremacy”. FUSIT is one of those congregations. During this movement, I received an email from the then antiracism team. The email is phrased with the most caring and friendly words, asking me, a *person of color*, to tell *them*, the white people in this congregation who are reflecting on their supremacy, how they are treating me. At the time, I was serving my 2nd term on the board, after serving several years on the RE team. The moment I checked email I was taking a break from working on the 9am Adult Forum series “Elderhood”, which some of might have attended. I hope this background information could help you all to understand my shock – in what kind of antiracism sense did I suddenly become a person of color, the other, no long one of *us*?

Another relevant note, during the same period, I once thinking about attending the white supremacy reflection meeting. Guess what? I can’t. Those meetings are for whites only. Being a person of color, I have to reflect on my privileged life separately from my

fellow congregants. When we talk about “diversity”, are we aiming for “inclusion”? Or not?

2. Diversity and Difference.

[Bob]

Another story: When I was attending FUSIT in the 1980s, the Religious Education (RE) group conducted a **survey on beliefs about God**. The youth group posted the results on the walls of the parlor. This seemed like a promising step toward embracing the diversity of views in the congregation. I hoped the process would continue with **other topics. But the follow-up never came**. And in the 1990’s I participated in a course titled “**Building your own Theology**”, taught by FUSIT’s former interim minister, Richard Gilbert. It seemed to me an ideal topic for a congregation interested in opening itself to understanding its diversity. But these **personal contributions were never shared as part of a community building process**.

This congregation today is surely as diverse as it was then—perhaps more so. **Imagine what we might discover if FUSIT opened this space to dialogue on these questions as a central part of what it means to belong to this congregation**. We might find, for instance, that some members **voted for Trump**; that some are **pro-life**; that some on the left and on the right are **afraid of speaking against an apparent “liberal” consensus**. Of course it would be risky. We would need to truly live our values, including humility and empathy. We would need to learn the meaning of dialogue.

3. Difference leads to dialogue.

[Angela]

And another story.

Bob and I have many differences - gender, age, upbringing, language and cultural background. Such extreme differences inspire so much curiosity and deep dialog, and made our dialogues both difficult and rewarding. After many heated arguments in the earlier years of our relationship, I finally realized that what I said, what I meant, what he heard and what he interpreted are sometimes completely different things. You can find more detailed explanation in the two books by Deborah Tannen: “That’s not what I meant” and “You just don’t understand”.

Some of you might remember that several years ago I shared my painful experience of an involuntary abortion after an accidental pregnancy, due to the infamous “one child” policy in China. When I first learned about the pro-life idea, I thought “I wish I had those people coming to my support.” Of course, I soon discovered the opposite argument-- pro-choice. Luckily, with our many year of practice, this topic - pro-life and pro-choice - come up in our conversation again and again. Sadly, the “pro-life” vs “pro-choice” framing has created boxes that prevented us from having such conversation with others, including some friends and family. Can we step outside these political poles to find common understanding? That requires dialogue, so let’s look at what dialogue means and how it affects our meanings.

4. Dialogue and shared meaning

[Bob]

Let’s turn to the idea of dialogue at the center of this presentation. **Dialogue begins with difference**—not sameness or agreement, but the human fact of diversity. But if dialogue assumes difference, **how can dialogue be the basis for community?**

Physicist and philosopher David Bohm has a memorable metaphor for dialogue: Bohm explains that **“dia” means “through” and “logos” means “the word” or “meaning.”** From this, he writes:

“The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of **a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us.**”

Dialogue allows us to step outside the stream powered by the conventional meaning of the words and explore the world together. We do this by exploring meaning together. **In dialogue, we sit beside the stream of meaning, letting understanding emerge rather than trying to control it. Words flow on the current in this stream of meaning.**

Now back to the **main point**. It seems that cultural differences are often at the root of different interpretations of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. **DEI has become a contentious political metamessage** rather than a simple message using these words in an ordinary sense.

These value words are abstractions, shaped and conventionalized by generations of use and struggle. And because of this history, the abstractions are subject to multiple interpretations, and manipulations.

But words are not merely labels for abstractions. They also live in our world and our relationships. And our words live most fully when our relationships are rooted in dialogue, sitting together by the stream of meaning, watching as we create and share.

5. Equity and Equality

[Bob]

Today is the 6th of July, and we just celebrated the 4th of July. The declaration of independence contains these memorable words: **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”**. This value of equality was a deeply important guiding light for those who fought to end slavery, for those who fought for (and still fight for) equality of women, and for equal voting rights, etc.

The new UU statement of values selects 6 words to guide attention, Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity, organized around the center of love. But it **doesn’t include “equality”**. So today we want to focus on “equality” – and reflect on the different currents these words energize through the stream of meaning.

We want to point out that **equity – defined as fairness or proportion – can come into tension and conflict with equality**. We can see the tension more clearly if we ask this question: **Should we be asking for more equity in the distribution of wealth? or more equality?**

A couple of weeks ago **Jeff Bezos** – the richest person in the world – got married. His wedding was attended by a small group, including billionaires such as Oprah, Usher, Corey Gamble (African-Americans), the Kardashians (Armenian-American), Mark Zuckerberg (Jewish) and Priscilla Chan (Chinese-American), etc. **Should we see diverse list as a victory for “equity” –a more equitable distribution of billionaires? Perhaps ... if equity is on our minds.**

These two values can act like image gestalts. Seeing one interpretation of the gestalt image prevents seeing the other interpretation. In the same way, using one

word can make it difficult to see the world through the lens offered by the other word.

The point is that **equity and equality are competing** for our attention. If we don't acknowledge this, we risk trying to make inequality more equitable - and thereby making it more tolerable - rather than challenging and reducing inequality.

There are voices warning that focusing only on racial or gender disparities - without looking also directly at inequality - allows us to ignore the deeper economic structures of inequality.

Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed have argued that **anti-racism, while morally necessary, cannot substitute for a politics of economic justice**. As they put it: "If the objective is to eliminate Black poverty rather than simply to benefit the upper classes, we believe the diagnosis of racism is wrong, and the cure of anti-racism won't work."

Racism does matter. But focusing only on disparities between groups allows the preservation of the basic shape of inequality—as long as inequality is fairly distributed. In other words, we may end up celebrating a world with proportionate numbers of poor white, Black, and brown people, rather than addressing the sources of poverty itself – the social and mental structures with which we approach the problem. Some worried about the dominance of "neoliberalism". We are also living in the world advocated by Richard Nixon as "Black Capitalism" – making sure our billionaires are a diverse group.

The issue of conflicting perspectives also affects other issues. In the "equity" frame of mind, we may look only at the issue of discrimination in college admissions - in terms of proportions of different groups - Jews, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans etc. - rather than considering the role of an elite Universities in our social-cultural life. In this way, we have left it to Trump and affiliated political forces to raise this more fundamental question – and to answer it in destructive rather than constructive ways.

This is the danger of what some have called **"diversity without redistribution."** And it's a danger we must face. Philosopher **Michael Sandel** points out that **"Mobility can no longer compensate for inequality**. Any serious response... must

reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth.” In the same vein, we believe that pursuing equity – that is, making mobility fair and equitable – can no longer compensate for inequality. **We need to broaden the focus and attend to class inequality.**

And this is an interesting prospect – it seems clear that in many cases, **focusing on substantive changes for the working classes will bring more change for poor and working class minorities than focusing on making our inequalities more fairly distributed – i.e., equitable.**

- **reducing poverty among all sectors of society** is likely to bring more real change to the lives of poor African-Americans than making the distribution of billionaires more equitable.
- **reducing police killings among all sectors of society** is likely to bring more real change to the lives of poor African-Americans than making the distribution of police killings equitable.
- **reducing wage discrepancies between workers and CEOs** is likely to bring more real change to the lives of all poor people – including women, African-Americans, Hispanics, etc - than making the distribution of these groups more equitable in each income category.

6. Love and democracy

[Bob]

The theme of this summer session is an invitation to **speak our truths**. One truth we want to propose is that when we **recognize the world is seen through different lenses**, shaped by culture, experience, and conscience, **love can invite us to dialogue**. Living our words means listening for the truth in someone else’s experience. And it means creating a **culture where disagreement is not a threat, but a gift**. Where the goal is not to ignore differences but to learn from them. Where pluralism is not just about boxes and identity categories, but about the deep work of meaning-making in community.

This has implications for our understanding of **democracy**. We are struggling to grapple with the threats to our **pursuit of democracy** – a pursuit made difficult by our rather **undemocratic political structure**. As political theorist William Connolly reminds us, in this context, the health of a political system depends not on the absence of conflict, but on our ability to live with it. In his model of “agonistic democracy,” **conflict is not an enemy of unity but a precondition for real**

solidarity. In the same way, I would suggest that **accepting our diversity does not create disunity, but is a precondition for dialogue and real community.**

7. Conclusion: Living our Words

[Angela]

Dictionaries give us common meanings. But they do not give us shared understanding.

Only dialogue can do that. Dialogue is how we can build both diversity and community in ways that reinforce each other:

The foundation of creating a thriving community is preserving and nurturing individuality.

And the foundation of creating thriving individuals is preserving and nurturing the community.

There is a great deal of diversity in any group, just because it is human. Without finding ways to accept diversity, may find ourselves exasperated - repeating **Charlie Brown's exclamation – I love humanity, its people I can't stand.**

Without ongoing dialogue about our existing differences – **without putting these differences at the center of congregational life, celebrating difference - we are ill equipped to deal with the full range of diversity in our society and in the world.**

- When we dialogue, we do not erase difference. We build on it.
- When we dialogue, we do not ignore power. We interrogate it.
- When we dialogue, we do not seek peace without justice. We seek peace through justice.

[Bob]

This week, we invite all of us to have one brave conversation—with someone whose views challenge us.

Let us sit together by the stream of meaning. Not to debate, but, if we can, to learn to dialogue – to learn by letting our words themselves include more of the diverse experiences and conditions in our shared world.