

The Wrong Side of the Road
A sermon by Rev. Cathy Rion Starr 3/1/20
Unitarian Society of Hartford

When we were in Delhi in November (thankfully not this last week full of violence and a visit by 45), I had a jarring experience:

We drove on the WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD!!

By which I mean, of course, the LEFT side. My head hurt each time we drove through town, wincing as cars would come towards us. I looked at the driver's seat and got scared seeing our friend Chris concentrating on his phone....only to realize that he was not, in fact driving – the driver sat on the RIGHT side of the car and was paying careful attention to the road.

This happened not once or twice, but again and again. I would get out on the wrong side...thinking I was getting out onto the sidewalk but in fact stepping right into traffic.

It hurt my brain to shift to a different norm: I knew in my head that this way of being is not a wrong one or bad one, just different. But after 40 years of driving on the right side of the road, this legacy of British colonialism felt incredibly disorienting.

And I love that!

I love this visceral reminder that my way – or our U.S. way – is not the RIGHT way. It is one way among many. Yet because our norms are like the air we breathe, it is hard to notice them unless we bump up against different norms. I became fascinated by how hard it was for my brain to adjust to this seemingly simple shift and I am oh-so-glad that I did not have to get in the drivers seat myself.

Some of you saw the video last week in our slideshow of pulling out of our friend Joseph's apartment complex in Manila – we slowly pulled out into 4 lanes of traffic to make a left turn into another 4 lanes of traffic. This norm, too, took some getting used to – my heart skipping a beat as we pulled out into oncoming traffic – wha?!? Then once I caught my breath, I would stare in awe as the cars would let us in – not honking, not gesturing angrily – just let us make our way into the oncoming traffic.

By the time we got to India, I had almost gotten used to this lovely norm – which was also true in India: our driver would routinely make a left turn (this time NOT across traffic because we were driving on the left side of the road...brain hurting again...) – and the cars coming towards us at 20 or 30 miles an hour would slow to let us in. No honking. No foul gestures. That was just the rule of the road.

Wouldn't that be nice here? For the norm to be letting people in rather than seeing them as cutting us off?

I was fascinated by the different rules of the road in both countries – at first glance, it seemed chaotic and scary and loud...but that was because I could only see the system through my U.S.-driver's eyes. But there, you let people in when they're trying to turn. You honk before going around a tight corner on a hilly twisty road. You plan to sit in traffic for a long, long time (especially in Manila).

By the end of our trip, I had adjusted to the different rules of the road. I had found my zen with hours of car time each day (with appreciation for the paid driver at the wheel). My brain stopped hurting because we drove on the left side of the road....and I was glad that I didn't have to drive home from Boston once we got back to the U.S., but got to take a day or so to readjust to the rules of the road here.

This is one of the things I have loved each time I have had the privilege of traveling outside the country: my own framework and the norms I take for granted are challenged. I am reminded that there are many ways to be. To live, to drive, to eat, to think, to govern, to parent, to work, to play.

I gain perspective on the way I do all those things when confronted with difference. I want us to talk more about those differences. I want us to get really clear about our norms and frameworks – by “our” I mean our dominant US culture, our culture at USH, and I mean each of us individually. I want us to be able to talk very specifically about each of our cultures and ways of being. Because that is what helps us recognize and honor our differences and be in authentic conversation and community with others.

There's a lot about “diversity” that says we should look past differences to find our commonalities...but we need to honor BOTH our commonalities AND our differences to truly build strong communities. As Audre Lorde put it: “It is not

our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

Beth Zemsky is a white, queer organizer and educator who teaches about cultural competence. She writes *“Culture is about shared patterns that help us make meaning of our environment and determine appropriate behavior.”*¹

What is appropriate in one culture (like driving on the left or letting people in) is inappropriate in another culture (here we drive on the right). This isn’t just about nations – it’s something that every kid navigates when they go from home to school to a friend’s house. They quickly figure out how to negotiate different rules and norms in each place.

I learned not to swear in front of my mother – EVER. Like really ever. But my dad and brother and I share off-color jokes with each other. I would never swear here in the pulpit, but I often do in conversation with younger folks or more working class folks or other contexts where swearing is appropriate.

“Culture is about shared patterns that help us make meaning of our environment and determine appropriate behavior.”

Zemsky, in her training on intercultural competency and communication, looks at the golden rule:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Zemsky unpacks this: if I follow this, then if I’m perfectly comfortable with cussing in some contexts – that is what I would have done unto me....then I should do unto others that way: it’s fine to swear with my mom or others for whom swearing is offensive. Zemsky introduced me to the Platinum Rule:

Do unto others as they would do unto themselves.

My mom doesn’t like swearing, so I won’t swear around her – because that’s what she wants. But in order to do unto others as they would do unto themselves, we need to KNOW what their norms and preferences are....rather a default of assuming that what they want is the same as what we would want.

We need to know what we share in common and where our differences lie. We need to know ourselves and our cultures in order to have effective cross-cultural communication. [And Zemsky points out that any time you have 2 people, you have cross-cultural communication.]

We were in Delhi at the height of crop burning season. We could see the fires burning from cruising altitude in the plane. The smoke from these fires drifted into the bowl of Delhi, combining with the city's own air pollution to create abysmal and at times dangerous air quality (400ppm when less than 50ppm is considered safe). It was unfathomable to us that most Indians didn't use masks or air filters and had adjusted to the air that was palpably awful to us.

Another norm. How can they live like this?! Why aren't they wearing masks?! We asked all the judgmental questions of privileged outsiders....thankfully to our friends who are Americans living in India and who we know well enough to be brutally honest with.

My friend Shubha explained the politics: the politicians tell the city dwellers that they are committed to working to stop the burning of crops and improve air quality measures. They then go into the countryside and preach the opposite to their rural voters: the elite city dwellers are trying to change your way of life and we will protect your farmland and support you. I can't break down the politics as well as Shubha can....but she spelled out the political gridlock clearly as the smart political economist that she is.

Heather and I were still in shock at the tolerance of this unhealthy, toxic air. Then Shubha said: people here ask me all the time about gun violence and school massacres in the US. How can Americans live like that, they ask in astonishment.

Ohhhhhhhh.....

Slowly, my brain did that painful, norm-twisting thing it did on the road as I realized what she was saying: we in the U.S. have become accustomed to school shootings. They are as egregious and horrific as the air quality in Delhi – perhaps even moreso, or perhaps just different.

And the politics are basically the same: political gridlock maintains a status quo that is killing people regularly through its inaction.

It took going to India to be reminded that school shootings are not normal. They are not a norm in the rest of the world. Even in the places that I have been taught are less-than, more-poor, "less-developed"—they look at our country and are incredulous. As they should be.

And I realized that I am caught in the vice of all those awful stereotypes that I have tried so hard to resist about other countries being less-than and about American exceptionalism.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” (Lorde)

Going to India forced me to recognize and accept some of the differences that I hadn't even realized were norms here – neutral norms like how we drive. And much more lethal ones, like school shootings that I've become numb to as a way of coping.

American exceptionalism is as toxic as Delhi's air quality.

Let me go back to driving for a minute: I live on a circle that has a T without a stop sign, and a fence that makes it hard to see around the corner, where it is unclear who has the right of way. So one day I was driving down to the top of the T and didn't see the car coming the other way – and of course, I assumed I had the right of way (I'm always right, right?). Luckily, we didn't hit, but it was close.

Then I did something I'm not proud of and have regretted ever since: I yelled at the other driver: “slow down! There are kids on this street!”

To which he responded: I know, I live here.

[Guiltyface]

I did not treat my neighbor with the golden rule OR the platinum rule. I had simply assumed a norm that worked for me: that I had the right of way. And because of that, I almost got in an accident and was mean to one of my neighbors.

I do not have the right of way all the time.

I don't even KNOW the right of way a good chunk of the time.

And that's where the biggest problem is: I forget this, ignore it, and move too fast, assuming that my way is the right way. That my norms are everyone's. This is what many of us have been taught.

This, my friends, is our work.

In this time of news headlines and social media riling us up all the time; in this time of incredible and discouraging political polarization; in this year of an election critical to the future of democracy and justice,

Our work is to s-l-o-w d-o –w-n

Enough to consider what side of the road we are driving on.

To find the immense energy it takes to shift our brains to drive on the wrong side of the road.

To really dig into our own ways of being and cultures.

To shift from the Golden Rule to the Platinum Rule.

Maybe, if we can move out of our comfort zones and bring curiosity to our differences; Maybe, just maybe, we can bridge towards solutions to the big challenges of our time together.

Solutions where people are still really really different from each other, but where each person's basic needs are met. Where everyone can go to the doctor or specialist without worrying about how to pay for it. Where everyone has a safe and loving home and school and community. Where we are able to mitigate the impacts of climate change and strengthen our democracy.

It's not so much to ask.

But it's going to take a heckuva lot of work. A whole lot of honesty about each of our own cultures, assumptions, and frameworks. A recommitment to get to know our neighbors.

Maybe even, as one of my neighbors recently suggested, putting a stop sign on the T on our street so that the right of way is clear.

May we commit and recommit to helping each other read the signs about how to navigate this world.

May we be part of solutions and humble building together.

So may it be.

ⁱ From a training with Beth Zemsky at All Souls Unitarian Church of DC staff in 2015.