

Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

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Don't you wish, sometimes, that you could travel back in time, just far enough to read your own mind at a particular moment? This was *my* wish earlier this week as I tried to remember why I had chosen "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral" as the title of this sermon. Fortunately, a member showed up at the perfect time to tell me that she found it remarkable that someone else must play that game with their children's friends, too! Her family plays it in the car as a great way of breaking the ice with new friends and getting to know each other better and she knew that my sermons in September were all about ways to make deeper connections within our congregational family. "Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" is the first question in the game of Twenty Questions. She thought it was a perfect title. I felt better.

I had originally been thinking that "Animal, vegetable, or mineral" related to an idea I had about getting to know each other better by talking about our favorite things. Last Sunday's sermon, "Getting To Know You" was the first in my three-part September series on the subject. For example, you know that some of *my* favorite things are gardens and flowers and children and water and books and looking things up – and I could go on and on. Oh, I forgot to mention laughing. I once had a book called 15000 Things to be Happy About, but apparently that wasn't enough and I kept thinking of more things that I would write in on the inside of the covers!

I'm learning many of your favorite things too. I know that some of you really like jazz, and some really like making music or theater. From the adult education series last year on World Religions I know a number of you like learning about how other people think and what they believe and how that might be relevant for us. Some of you are dedicated to projects you are involved with that make some part of our world a less scary or less hungry place. I know many of you loved your NELS leadership training experience and some of you really love Star Island. And after the water ingathering ceremony earlier this month I know that a great number of you have a thing for the state of Maine!

But the truth is that I have always had a problem with the very concept of having favorites. Could I tell you my favorite color? No, because I have so many. My favorite book – no way. I could never choose a "best" friend! Favorite place I've ever visited? Scotland would be up there, but I don't know if I could say it's absolutely my favorite. I don't think I could ever make a list of my favorites, like Oprah, so that you could all go out and buy them just because I said so! How could I ever pick one of anything? Only if you ask about something like my favorite kind of bath towel might I actually have a certain preference. It is good to be a bit discriminating.

But not too discriminating, and there's the rub. Picking favorites is, by its very nature, discriminating. And discrimination can lead to division can lead to divisiveness can lead to oppression. Wow, from choosing a favorite color to racism in two paragraphs. But

it's true that our desire to categorize and separate has been used very effectively throughout the history of human kind as a means to exclude the "other." It is what we do not want to do in our spiritual community, because we try here to model what a loving society, a beloved community, would look like. This is a safe place to practice our ideals.

By the way, I knew the expression "there's the rub," but wasn't sure where it came from or whether it was or was not a polite thing to say in public. Fortunately, it is. Shakespeare made it famous in Hamlet, but the origin of this little phrase is the very old British game of lawn bowling. A "rub" is a fault in the grass, or the green, that prevents the ball from going where you wanted it to go. A rub is a problem.

So the rub in picking favorites is in the choosing, in the labeling, in the judgment, in the division, in the exclusion, in the limits that are set. Animal, vegetable, or mineral; we humans have a great propensity to want to organize things! It's in our nature to put everything into neat compartments, with nice little labels. Maybe it's part of our need to find meaning in our world and in our lives.

Categorizing definitely has its positive aspects (taxonomic identification is a big one) but categorizing can also diminish our capacity for acceptance and inclusion. If we are about making community, then things that divide us diminish that community. Nicholas Carr came to this inevitable conclusion: "The human urge to divide communities is just slightly stronger than the human urge to create them."

(www.routhtype.com/archives/2006/09/small_pieces_un.php)

So I said we were about creating community, and I believe that we are. But look at the many ways in which we categorize ourselves within this community. Members/Friends. Long-time member/Newcomer. With children or without. Theist/Humanist or Naturalist. And I have not mentioned categories of class, race, ethnicity or sexual preference.

We love to put everything in its place, including ourselves. Maybe you are one who says to yourself "I'm not good enough." "I'm not smart enough." "I'm not activist enough." "I can't sing well enough to join the choir." Or, conversely, I'm better or smarter or more talented or more educated or prettier or better dressed, etc. More religious.

To me, all this kind of thinking does is set limits – on others and on yourself, and the expectations you have for yourself and others. Comparing ourselves to others can be useful to a degree, but dangerous in the extreme. Everything in moderation, especially descriptions that comes with value judgments. If we truly are open to becoming a more diverse community, then our differences will need to be celebrated, not swallowed by the elephant in the room and never mentioned.

Remember my sermon from last spring about the lack of a genetic basis for dividing the human race into categories determined by skin color? There is an example of human categorizing that has had extremely sad consequences, while the reality is that we are more alike than we ever knew! The differences in our skin color should be celebrated as

awesome evolutionary adaptations that helped human beings to live at different latitudes on the Earth! It's an amazing story about the ability of a species to adapt to changing environments.

Many people in our world find security in absolutes. They become confused in the gray areas of uncertainty. For them an open mind is a vague mind. Unitarian Universalism is criticized, from without and sometimes from within, for our love affair with uncertainty. But the very nature of Nature, from the infinitely big to the infinitely small sub-atomic particle is being shown by science to be a product of chance and the probability that comes with infinite possibility.

Ilya Prigogine, the 1977 Nobel prize winner in Chemistry, wrote that "the story of the sciences in the 20th century is one of a steady loss of certainty.....We might say that we were looking for global schemes, symmetries, universal and unchanging laws – and what we have discovered is the mutable, the ephemeral, the complex." (Internet) There are many things that do not fit well into our human-thought-up cubbyholes. There really aren't many absolutes in our world, just some relatively good matches.

Animal, vegetable, or mineral? Does everything fit into one and only one of these categories? The answer is no, it's much more complicated than that. Coral, for example, is a symbiotic relationship between an animal (the coral polyp) and an algae which is a plant. What about viruses? By classic definition they are neither animal nor vegetable. I guess that leaves mineral?

What about the categories we divide ourselves into, within our congregation? The upstairs people and the downstairs RE families? That is a division that can only serve to keep us insular and small. Some people here are comfortable with the word and the concept of God, others are not. What really matters is that we all hold up the same values and principles of how to live our lives. The superficial differences in specific beliefs do not matter. This is the cornerstone of this institution of religious freedom. Minister and congregants? It's an artificial separation, for after all, I came into ministry out of a congregation. As you will read in my minister's message in the October newsletter, ministry is something I believe we share. Our mutual mission is the larger Ministry. We will accomplish it together.

Member, first-time visitor, family with children, retired couple? Your individuality matters, but your inclusion matters more. We are a congregation, not a collection.

Animal, vegetable, or mineral? It really doesn't matter. It's all part of this inspiring thing called creation. We exist, and I for one am happy there is something, and not nothing. We are. We are capable of the good and the beautiful. We are capable of love.

Those are my favorites.