

One Size Fits All
UUF

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Someone should have trademarked the term “one size fits all”. It’s a great idea. A wonderful concept, with so many possible applications. It’s optimistic and simplifies things considerably. It’s neat and clean...no fuss, no muss. It’s the holy grail of marketing. But as all consumers know, it seldom lives up to the hype. Life is not that neat and clean.

We generally associate the concept with clothing. But such a great idea couldn’t be contained to the world of apparel. The concept has crept into almost every sphere of existence. Take for example problem solving. We often presume there is a single best way to solve problems. There’s a formula, five steps: define the problem, determine the causes, generate ideas, select the best idea, then implement or take action.

That’s what the mechanic does when working on your car. That’s what the doctor does when treating a patient. But it doesn’t stop there. The concept applies to the way we operate. During the last decade, many corporations have redesigned work places based on an open space concept. They’ve done away with private office space. People are placed at workstations with no walls between them. Executives and paper pushers, all able to see each other. And, unfortunately, as it turns out, able to hear each other... all the time.

That type of office space was designed on purpose, with intentionality. Other types of design just happen. They happen because it’s obvious. It’s obvious to the designers and probably to the generic public. Like male and female bathrooms. They’re everywhere. It’s generally expected there will be bathrooms labeled male and female...to satisfy the needs of all.

One size fits all. Or so it’s generally thought. It’s more accurate however, more honest, to say it generally is not thought about at all. I can bear witness to the fact.

I was at a conference of some sort. Colleagues and I went out to lunch. Walking back to the conference, one of my friends said, “lets hurry, I want to get back to my room”. I said, “Why, do you need to get some work done?” “No” was the answer, “I need to get to the bathroom”.

What an odd response I thought! I said, “Why didn’t you go at the restaurant?” The answer was, “there were only male and female bathrooms. I have the same issue when I preach at congregations. I’m unwilling to be put in a position where I have to choose.”

I knew this person to be non-gender conforming. I knew “they” had to deal with various people’s reactions, questions, concerns and prejudices. It never occurred to me that “they” had to plan ahead about when and where to go to the bathroom!

I feel silent. My heart sunk. I felt anguish for what felt to me a burden. My mind flashed to colored and white bathrooms. I felt embarrassment and disappointment in myself for being so oblivious, so unaware. Much of my life has been dedicated to antiracism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism....and I had no idea!

Male and female bathrooms are normal. They’re everywhere...in stores, restaurants...and in our congregations... congregations that call ourselves “welcoming”.

“One size fits all” is an easy paradigm to fall into. And once in it, we can become blind and oblivious. We can become blind not out of meanness, not out of intent. But out of myopia, born of *our own* experience of what’s normal.

Sometimes our myopia grows out of our sense of what’s “right”. I know someone who is transitioning from female to male. “They” are taking hormones, legally changed their name...the works, it’s been made public.

I know the partner better than the individual. One day, the partner used the term “they” referring to the individual. After the second or third time I heard the phrase---I couldn’t ignore my chaffing at the grammar. “They” is plural! I didn’t simply ask, why.

Instead, I tapped into my understanding of psychology, and my genuine concern for the individual’s well-being. I expressed concern for the potential negative impact of heightening the person’s sense of duality. They is plural! I was told it was an intentionally chosen term.

I didn't need to ask why. My diversity work has taught me people have a right to define themselves. They have a right to name themselves. They have a right to name their reality. And they have that right even when it makes me uncomfortable, even when I just don't get it.

What's important to point out is not my frailties; my ignorance, naiveté or blindness. Although, all are true. What's important to note about each of those examples is I only learned, made discoveries, became aware, educated...by being in relationship.

It was only by being in open relationship, in dialogue with "difference". That's how I became aware of what I didn't know. I became aware of my own...I'll call it ignorance. It wasn't head-in-the-sand- ignorance, but it was a lack of understanding, a lack of knowledge, which, by definition, is properly called ignorance. I've come to live with the duality of being smart and ignorant at the same time. It's humbling.

We all live with a rule book. While the details, the entries may differ, we all live by a rule book. For the most part, we've been taught what's in the rule book, and we've made it our own. We've been taught what's normal. We've been taught particular definitions of "one size fits all". Other entries are created out of our personal life experiences.

Our rule books, in greatest measure, reflect what's culturally normative. Like the fish in water, we often have no awareness of the water we swim in. Frogs and turtles know the difference between water and air. Landlubbers recognize water...although we seldom notice air.

Other cultures regularly recognize the manifestations of our particular rule book. The term "Ugly American" came out of experience of our difference. Our rule book, maybe all rule books, place us at the center. Our normative behavior, structure, beliefs are often assumed to "fit all".

Our rule book supports, maybe even generates, the notion of American exceptionalism. There is a superiority built into our definition of ourselves. There is a form of expectation that others should defer. We often assume we can go anywhere in the world and not need to learn their language.

As most of you have heard, the top of the UUA organization is in tumult. The President has resigned, along with two other very senior people. Their resignations are part of the fallout from controversy over the association's hiring practices and its nearly all-white leadership. The charge is that UUA leadership systematically privileges white, ordained religious leaders.

During many emergency meetings, among other decisions, the board committed to launch a "racism audit" of the UUA. And endorsed a "UU White Supremacy Teach In" promoted by UU religious educators. The Teach In was also endorsed by the UUA Leadership Council (which is organizing a teach-in for its own staff), the Liberal Religious Educators Association, and the UU Ministers Association.

The UUA Leadership Council sent a letter to congregational leaders which described recent events and included an apology for the harm caused by "unfulfilled commitments to dismantle racism" within Unitarian Universalism and at the UUA. They may have been referencing the 1997 General Assembly business resolution "Toward an Anti-Racist Unitarian Universalist Association".

The board has gotten a bunch of letters from various UU organizations, including our own NYMetro District board. I want to hold up a portion of one letter in particular. It comes from the steering committee of Allies for Racial Equity, an organization of white allies of a group representing UU POC.

"As a predominantly white organization that claims to be working toward being anti-racist and anti-oppressive, we need to learn to stop looking away, and face [white supremacy] directly. We need to see ourselves in the patterns that continue to oppress and silence the People of Color in our midst and in our leadership."

This will not be the last time you are likely to hear terms like racism, oppression, white privilege and white supremacy. For many, these are harsh and hard terms to hear. I believe they are hard to hear because people tend to hear the terms as a personal affront, an assault upon the individual listener.

I urge you with all my heart to resist such an interpretation, please resist taking these terms personally. As I said earlier, it was only by being in open relationship, in dialogue with “difference”, that I became aware of what this smart, committed person, I, didn’t know.

I’d like you to think of such terms as an invitation to examine the fine print in our American cultural rule book. Think of it as being asked to notice air. I’m asking you to understand and accept that one size does not fit all. One interpretation is not the only interpretation.

People who use these terms are asking us to notice that the early pages of our cultural rule book were written when blacks were defined as 3/5 human and women were the property of their husbands. There are words in that book of ours, that supported the taking of native American’s land and the property and internment of Japanese Americans. Consider, they are asking us to notice that most white Americans do not have personal relationships with people who represent significant difference.

The salient question is how does belief in inherent worth and dignity get operationalized, manifested, how is it made real? My answer is when we honor another person’s truth. Honoring another person’s truth requires more than a belief in our intelligence, our own answers, our own rightness. That’s why I push having a spiritual practice, having a relationship with our deeper sense of self, our non-ego selves.

What I believe I know is that the Beloved Community does not have a rule book defining who fits and who doesn’t. I believe the Beloved Community, when it is made real, will be the only entity that can truly say, “one size fits all”.

Martin said, "I may not get there with you..." but he gave his life tilling the field, so that such a community could take root and grow. Let us too, labor, so that Community can grow. Our work is to accept our ignorance, sit with discomfort, to listen to what may "just not make sense", and honor it as someone's truth.

Our work is to make real, the inherent worth and dignity of all.

May it be so, Amen.