

Response to Diana K. Davies Session Four Paper—2024 Prairie Group

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Wow, Diana, what a wonderful, amazing, and insightful paper. It contains multitudes in such powerful ways. I'm going to pick up one strand among the multitudes that particularly struck me.

I have also long struggled with the Water Ceremony while the Flower Communion¹ is so much easier and meaning-full. There are a lot of reasons for this, including the elitist assumption underlying the Water Ceremony's genesis, the power of Norbert and Maija Capek's story and witness for our faith that is the genesis of the Flower Communion, and the multiple ways in which the Flower Communion expresses core values and ideas of our global Unitarian/Universalist² faith—e.g., the individual flowers still evident in the larger flower bouquet versus the water in the Water Ceremony merging into one indistinguishable substance, as Diana put it in her paper.

Another reason the Flower Communion has resonated with me more than the Water Ceremony is where the former originated: not here. From the Flower Communion's creation in Prague, it has spread to the United States and other places around the world.

No doubt there is misappropriation along the transmission route, but the ritual's grounding in core U/U values and ideas as well as the presence of translations of Capek's words in the ritual helps mitigate the risk of misappropriation. A strong case can be made that Capek viewed Unitarianism to which he gave his life as part of a global faith.

In my University of Chicago history of religions training, I heard a lot about religious syncretism— “the process of combining two or more religious belief systems to create a new religion, or to incorporate beliefs from other faiths into an existing religion.” That's not quite the right term for what's happened with the Flower Communion. The various incarnations of global Unitarian/Universalism are spiritual kinfolk of one another. When the kinfolk relationships are mutual, there is a way in which each incarnation can be changed by its encounters with other U/U kinfolk. Every time this happens, our global U/U faith family changes, too.

¹ After checking into the translation used by Czech Unitarians for the flower ritual, I'm using their preferred translation of “Flower Communion.”

² Unitarian/Universalist (U/U) signifies the global faith family that includes Unitarian, Universalist, Unitarian Universalist, the Free Church tradition in the UK, and other variants that consider themselves part of the faith family.

Of course, actual mutual relationship is neither easy nor currently common—especially when one of the interacting parties is American Unitarian Universalism. There are so many layers of American UU colonialism, imperialism, and White supremacy in our relationships with overseas U/U faith families.³

I was the last non-temporary executive director of the UU Partner Church Council (UUPCC). When I left in the spring of 2020, the UUPCC was well on its way to going out of existence, as was the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.

The UUPCC did a lot of good work—that’s why I gave five years of my ministry to it—but it also supported too many American UU relationships with overseas partners that were steeped in colonialism and paternalism. The mission of the UUPCC—supporting partnerships between U.S. and Canadian partners with overseas partners—was inherently North American-centric.

Diana asks: What must die so that new life can punch through. Well, the UUPCC and the ICUU. Those deaths created space for new life which is now beginning to punch through—in the form of a new international organization that was designed by a truly global team and that will be based outside of the United States with a first executive director from the global South. The global U/U community is evolving from a model steeped in colonialism and White supremacy culture to co-becoming. Or at least there’s a chance that it is happening.

A better label than syncretism for what can happen when there is thoroughly mutual relationship among our global U/U kinfolk is symbiogenesis. This speculative vision evident in the works of Butler, Okorafor, and Jemisin offers a picture of what a thoroughly mutual international U/U relationship might look like: as Diana puts it, “deeply interdependent beings abiding together” (albeit in an often extremely awkward dance).

“Might” is an important word in the last sentence. Becoming deeply interdependent beings abiding together won’t have a chance of happening if we American UU’s don’t do our work. The power differential and the legacy of our oppression/suppression/denial won’t magically disappear. These things will always be present. Parasitism—which is a better description of U.S. relationship to overseas U/U kinfolk to date—is always a strong possibility.

What would it look like to have relationships between different U/U incarnations that cause all of us to evolve through radically deep, symbiotic relationships? Maybe we

³ Nowhere is this more evident than in our complicated relationship with Philippines Unitarian Universalists. As Fred Muir illustrates in articles and, (hopefully) soon, a book, we have hardly begun to reckon with the outsize role of our American Unitarian and Universalist ancestors in colonizing the Philippines. A relationship of true mutuality between American and Philippines Unitarian Universalists is impossible without our reckoning with this and without our doing repair work.

could try to find out? Maybe the spiritual freak show we might become, the mutual global U/U faith we might become in which difference is queered, might yield some unimaginable new life—some unimaginable new life that might just be part of what can save our faith. And us.