It’s Okay to Be Different


“How can I as a unique human being live with other unique human beings?”
“How can I accept and live with people whose philosophy negates my own?”

These two questions emerge from one of my core struggles, a feeling of difference; trying to live as someone different in a world that usually does not value or honor difference. We all have these core struggles that seem to follow us around, what we might call “personal themes.” For some a theme might be struggling with low self-esteem, for others it might be loneliness, a sense of abandonment, or fear of poverty. Feeling different has been one of my themes since childhood. Since these themes are so important to us, we often see them everywhere.

The terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001 triggered a global, national, and personal search for appropriate responses. This event was complex and emerged from many causes. In addition to economic and social causes, I saw in the attack a struggle with our essential differences, my personal theme, and while searching for responses focused again on ways to live with these differences. My search had been blocked by a moral dilemma for years, but these tragic events were so extreme that I was able to see a way through to an ethical solution and possible actions. To understand the dilemma and the conceptual breakthrough, I’ll need to back up a bit.

My struggle with feeling different seems to have always been with me. I was philosophically oriented as a teenager, an age when most of those in my school were focused on other issues, and I had no one in my age group with whom to share my explorations. When I was 17, living temporarily away from my family, culture shock focused my attention on differences and I came to realize that each human being is very different from all others at the core, not just on the surface. We are each of us separate, unique individuals. This “problem of uniqueness” is one of the root problems that all people and all social systems have to address. If we are different, how can we get along?

While thinking about this essay I realized that people—individuals and societies—have come up with a number of coping strategies to deal with this “Uniqueness Problem” which fall into one of several categories:

1. Denial – deny or ignore any differences.
2. Isolation – withdraw or expel those who are different.
3. Aggression – by economic, military, or cultural aggression, prove that one way of being is better, or more real, than another and force others to adopt that way.
4. Negotiation – accept differences as unavoidable and negotiate spheres of control, tolerance.
5. Acceptance – accept and embrace differences as essential to life.
If, as I hope is true, we are evolving towards acceptance of differences, then these strategies can be seen not only as different ways of coping, but as a progression of coping styles.

Denial, Isolation and Aggression are based on the illusion of sameness. Since maintaining illusions takes a great deal of energy, we eventually exhaust ourselves and the illusion breaks down. Denial asserts our essential sameness, attempting to gloss over all differences as trivial. Isolation tries to expel everyone who is different, but since everyone is unique, there must be a core group who, as in Denial, must gloss over their differences. Aggression tries to force everyone to be the same. The result is not true similarity, but suppression of the expression of differences. All these illusions are destined to fail.

This is nowhere more obvious than with America between the two world wars and in the 1950’s. Here was a society that desperately wanted Isolation from all other societies so that we could be happy and secure in our Americanism. What everyone chose to forget was that within our society we had a microcosm of world diversity having embraced people from most of the world’s cultures. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s was, for American isolationism, the dispelling of the illusion of homogeneity.

The Roman and British empires both used Aggression as a strategy, forcing the conquered peoples to adopt the dominant culture. After conquest, each empire struggled constantly with rebellion in an effort to enforce the illusion of sameness. Eventually they fell apart from within as the reality of diversity asserted itself. To paraphrase an old quote, “a person silenced is not a person convinced.”

Sameness is an illusion at all levels of society, from whole cultures down to families. At the family level, the “nuclear family” on its (crumbling) pedestal of indivisibility includes members with tremendous differences. One of our cultural themes, in movies, books and plays, is the breakdown of the illusion of sameness in families and the destructiveness of maintaining that illusion.

This illusion at the core of the first three strategies dooms them to fail, but they can do tremendous damage trying to defend against this constant threat of failure. An individual who denies differences with others will damage him or herself, stunting growth and self-awareness. Within a family, Isolation, as a by-product of alcoholism for example, can shut the family members off from outside help and unite the family in dysfunction. The damage of economic, military or cultural aggression, often called imperialism, is obvious: war-torn countries, countries which can’t feed themselves on the economically mandated monoculture needed for international commerce, and loss of culturally rich local variety. Only by moving to one of the last two strategies can a group move beyond the need to constantly battle the reality of difference.

The last two strategies, to one degree or another, have accepted the reality of difference and might be called the “liberal strategies.” “I’m willing to accept that you have a right to your way of being, and in return I ask that you accept that I have a right to my way of being.”
Negotiation is essentially the strategy of “realpolitik”, the politics of reality. The individual or group has accepted that there are and will always be differences, much as we might wish these differences would go away and much as we feel that “our way is best” or at least better. Since the differences are here to stay, we must work with these different people and societies as best we can.

Acceptance is the only strategy to openly embrace the reality of difference as a positive quality of life. To use this strategy presupposes letting our illusions go, or at least the illusion of sameness. At the core of this strategy is an acceptance that “I am different from everyone else.” If this is true, then I must assume that everyone else may also be different from each other. With this strategy, I will probably feel that my way is most likely best for me, though I’m open to learning from others, but I will not likely think that a solution to a problem that works for me will also work for someone else to the same degree. Reality becomes much more subjective, and much more complex. This is the strategy that says without hesitation, “It’s okay to be different.”

If we are different, how can we get along? How can I accept and live with people whose philosophy negates my own? For most of my life I’ve been vacillating between the Negotiation and Acceptance strategies for dealing with differences, trying to use Acceptance as much as possible but falling back to Negotiation when I’m confronted with people or ideas that are hard to take. To be successfully initiated, I’ve felt that these strategies need to be unilaterally declared; to honor my beliefs, I must be willing to initiate tolerance and acceptance without expectation of reciprocity. This is after all what valuing diversity means. Confronted with people or belief systems that view me or my values as wrong or evil, I have been reduced essentially to silence to accept their right to hold these differing points of view. In my effort to honor their right to be different, I have no recourse for asking them to honor my right to be different.

Because of their values, people who espouse a liberal, Acceptance viewpoint are usually reluctant to tell others what to do or think. This is what I call the “liberal moral dilemma.” Instead, we tend to ask questions and encourage others to ask questions. In those cases where a liberal value requires more insistence, as for example in the case of slavery and the U.S. Civil War, it takes a great deal of internal and external effort to move from asking questions to taking action, and even then the action is itself questioned (appropriately).

As described above, September 11th brought this moral conflict back to the forefront of my consciousness. It became clear that one of the prime differences between the terrorists and myself had to do with the simple idea that “it’s okay to be different.” People who hold that “it’s okay to be different” don’t try to kill each other over moral or value differences. Looking at the world I realized that there are some religions, political and economic philosophies that have incorporated this simple idea. I also realized that this was not always so; historically this has been a long-term and gradual process, but for these philosophies and religions incorporating an acceptance of diversity was revolutionary. When a group defines itself with a set of beliefs they hold to be absolute, accepting diversity fundamentally changes the original set of beliefs and
the transition is very difficult. It’s surprising anyone made the transition; it’s hopeful how many have.

There’s another piece to this puzzle: what we might call the “monolithic theory of philosophy.” People want to feel that their philosophy or religion is an indivisible whole. Philosophies try to build a world-view logically from “first principles” and religions hold that their beliefs emerge as a whole from the divine. In both cases changing one piece feels like destroying the whole. Seeing it as an indivisible whole adds credibility and therefore a feeling of security. This theory is particularly strong for people who adopt Denial, Isolation or Aggression as their strategy for coping with differences; they tend to be somewhat absolutist.

A common criticism of liberal philosophies and groups, from both without and within, has been that by advocating for a liberal, tolerant world-view we are being just as intolerant and dogmatic as the groups we are trying to change; we are trying to make the world into our image, another example of cultural imperialism. According to this criticism, the goal is a one-culture world, albeit a liberal one. We might intuitively feel the criticism is faulty, but we haven’t had a strong response. Given the “monolithic theory of philosophy,” it has indeed seemed as if we were engaged in a kind of cultural imperialism.

My critical insight while struggling with the tragedy of September 11th was the awareness that “it’s okay to be different” is an “idea piece” that has been spreading from philosophy to religion to economic theory. Maybe no philosophy, religion or economic theory is an indivisible whole, as we would like to believe. Rather each is a complex of idea pieces that have spread around the world, each complex unique, but each incorporating distinct elements that others have also incorporated. We might call this the “elemental theory of philosophy” and it opens up a solution to our ethical dilemma and an answer to the critics.

The advantage of this theory is that it allows us to ask others to incorporate a single idea piece without adopting the whole of our world-view. We can see that even if this particular piece might be central to our philosophy, we don’t own it and our world-view is made up of many other pieces blended into our own unique character. Looking at other groups who have incorporated diversity, we can see they are all different. Asking another group to accept an idea piece will change the group, but is not the same as asking them to adopt our whole world-view and will not make them into clones of us.

Of course we can’t expect this to be an easy process. As noted above, since the world-views in question hold that they are monolithically true, adopting this simple idea piece, “it’s okay to be different,” will be revolutionary. Fortunately or unfortunately, the world has become so small and the dangers so great that we must insist that all world views, all philosophies, all religions, all economic theories, even techniques for raising and educating children, adopt this idea, or the world will most likely go up in flames.

“It’s okay to be different” implies fundamental changes in policy. Religions that have adopted this, including the Quakers, Bahá’ís, and Unitarian/Universalists among others, do not
proselytize (to the best of my knowledge), since accepting differences means that it’s okay for people to follow other faiths. Environmentalists need to value diversity not only in the environment, but also politically and economically. Though they shouldn’t try to force others to adopt their whole “green” philosophy, they can demand that people with other political or economic philosophies adopt the principle of “it’s okay to be different,” which will go a long way towards meeting their goals. Economists need to develop a global economic philosophy that emphasizes coevolution and symbiosis rather than competition and survival of the fittest.

As an American, I can see that at its idealistic heart, America is a country that values diversity. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are, in the main, Acceptance and Negotiation strategy documents respectively. In practice America rarely rises to these heights; currently we are absorbed by Aggression in the form of competition, we export cultural imperialism, and impose our economic values on all we can. But ideally, at its root, America as a country embraces diversity. This is the American Dream: to live in a country where all people can pursue happiness as they see it. Often the only thing that Americans can agree on is their right to be different. Freedom means “it’s okay to be different,” and people all over the world see this American ideal and wonder why we don’t follow through.

In the days following September 11th, 2001, we all asked, “what can we do as individuals and collectively to counteract these horrific events and prevent them in the future?” Terrorism and fundamentalism assert in no uncertain terms that it’s not okay to be different and our national response has so far, ironically, been agreement. Instead, our response can and should be the opposite, asserting our right to be different and demanding that everyone, including ourselves, adopts this simple idea: all people are different and that’s okay. We can vote for people who have a long history of honoring differences. We can buy products from corporations that embrace multi-culturalism and downplay aggressive competition. We can look inside for remnants of intolerance, for lapses in acceptance and let go of them as we ask the same from others. This is a revolutionary demand, and it can change the world; not into a monoculture, but into a wonderful accepting diversity. It’s okay to be different.

Freedom Means It’s Okay to Be Different
(original title: Freedom & Other Things)


Freedom means it’s okay to be different. We are all different in sometimes little, sometimes major ways. Freedom respects and honors those differences, recognizing that each of us wants to live from the heart, live our truth. The only way to assure my right to live my truth is to agree that we all have that right - this is the contract of freedom.
Freedom does not mean no rules (anarchy and libertarianism), no fences (Wild West), or no regulations (economics, see below). These limited and negative definitions lead to oppression. Oppression means it’s okay for me or “us” to be free, to be different, to live my or our truth, but it’s not okay for you or “them” (anyone or everyone else). True freedom applies to all groups, all people, and this leads to the limits of freedom. Each of us needs to discover ways to express our unique individuality or culture in ways that don’t limit others.

Strangely, freedom is often tied to capitalism, which these days means the “free market,” implying that each of us, and each company, has the right to make money in its own way. The limits to freedom apply here also. For example, my freedom to maximize profits is oppression, not freedom, if I put others out of business. The “free market” is only free if it recognizes that all people have the right to make money in their own unique way. Unfortunately, as practiced, our “free market” seems to be all too often a market of oppression. The goal of a well-regulated free market should be to honor the mutuality of the contract of freedom for all people and companies.

Contracts are mutual agreements; when one party withdraws, the contract fails, and this is just as true for the contract of freedom, which says, you honor my differences and I’ll honor yours. Fundamentalism means it’s not okay to be different, different is bad, and we are seeing a rise in fundamentalist systems and values world-wide. This is true in America as well, “the land of the free,” where the new American conservatism, rooted in fundamentalist religious traditions, fails to honor the contract of freedom as it fails to honor our differences. The result is polarization, impasse, and war. Fundamentalism in general and American fundamentalism in particular is threatening our freedom.

The contract of freedom doesn’t require that we like our differences or believe what another believes; we just have honor them. If we fail to honor others’ right to be free, there will be no further reason for them to honor our right either. This is why freedom is a contract, it only works if all people meet their end of the bargain, and we have seen that the alternatives to freedom are much, much worse.