

Does Diversity Have to Be Serious?

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I remember my mother coming back from a local stream, otherwise known as the creek, with several medium sized rocks, worn and round, a perfect size and shape for the kimchee jar. The kimchee jar was nothing special; it was just a large, glass jar with a screw on lid. The kimchee that came out of it, however, was one-of-a-kind. I don't know my mother's kimchee recipe but I do know the concept behind it. First slice cabbage into mouth-sized pieces. Crush and dice enough garlic to scare away a small city's worth of vampires. Cut red pepper into small pieces, enough when added to a clear liquid, it turns pink. Throw cabbage, garlic, and pepper into the jar, add salt and some water. Put the aforementioned rocks in the jar over the ingredients. Screw on lid. Place jar in basement for six months. In Korea, people used to bury kimchee containers. After half a year, open jar. In less than 5 minutes, open windows for the whole house will smell of pickled, spicy cabbage even if the basement door is closed.

Making kimchee is an art. The recipe above is a much simplified version of the real process. The real process is known only to the cook. The amount of salt is measured by flicks of the wrist, the right kind of cabbage is determined by touch and smell. The arm's muscle memory and a discerning eye finds the right rock. This is an art of hundreds, maybe thousands of years.

My family's history is also thousands of years long dating back to the Shang dynasty in China. My family's American chapter is just short of 50 years, but that half a century is filled with pressure to assimilate, metamorphosis, and cultural collisions. The melting pot metaphor is passé because melted ingredients in the pot lose their identity. The melting pot is now a bouillabaisse or salad. The ingredients in each remain distinct but come together to make new flavors and textures. For the Delaware Uns, the blending of Korea and America was not a bouillabaisse or salad, but kimchee and Spam.

After the six-month long wait for the kimchee, my brothers and I eagerly awaited dinner, usually some kind of meat, kimchee, and rice, a little bit of cold and hot, a little bit of spicy and bland, a little bit of orange, white, and brown. My mother never gave the first taste of kimchee her seal of approval. It seemed that you couldn't let the cabbage pickle enough. After the kimchee did age enough, my mom would pull out an old, old pan (no Calphalon for her) and stir fry Spam cooked in its gelatinous goo. I'm not sure what that goo is. In fact, my brother who has a PhD in chemistry from Berkeley isn't sure either. Regardless, Spam browns nicely in it. Mom then added kimchee dripping in its pickle juice which immediately sizzled and splattered as it hit the pan. She then added a little of this and a little of that to complete the dish.

Meals at my house were more contests of speed and finesse than a time of family sharing. We didn't have a prayer or moment of silence. We didn't have to worry about elbows on or off the table. We didn't even have to ask for things to be passed because everything was in reach. In fact, some things which I would never do at my mother-in-law's home, were not only allowed but encouraged. Belching, for one, was a sign of respect for the cook. Honestly. Slurping one's soup, even picking up the soup bowl, showed an eagerness to engage fully with the broth and its ingredients. All this said, my brothers and I were pretty awful when it came to devouring mom's kimchee and Spam.

We brandished our chopsticks using them to parry the other chopsticks away from the choice morsels of evenly browned Spam. Kimchee was plentiful; Spam was not. We poked around with our chopsticks deftly pinching a healthy piece of Spam to a nice leafy morsel of kimchee. After about 5 minutes, finding the Spam and kimchee combo proved difficult; the Spam usually ran out pretty quickly. As we got older,

we abandoned the chopsticks for forks. Who cares about thousands of years of eating tradition when your brother is homing in on the last piece?

Spam and kimchee is by itself worthy of a sermon or at least discussion. Given that I may be the only full Korean present here in this sanctuary (or maybe the only person who can wax rhapsodic about Spam), I should offer to you a more figurative or metaphoric interpretation of my family's Spam and kimchee American experience.

In America, discussions of race and ethnicity get polemical, emotional, angry and sometimes violent. Even among like-minded people, talk of race and ethnicity is often serious and charged. Last year, a church group called UnMasc organized classes on a variety of -isms: classism, ageism, racism, homophobia, and ableism. We discussed the issues in small and large groups, did a lot of soul-searching, and many reexamined the way they see the world. I imagine that those on the other end of the political spectrum are no less intense as they delve into issues of race and ethnicity especially as they lament the progress of affirmative action, politically correct language, and the emergence of political figures like Barack Obama, Deval Patrick and Harold Ford.

Don't get me wrong, discussion of diversity must often be serious to push progress. UnMASC helped Unity Church evolve. Participants examined their own values and those of the church. As racial and ethnic differences continue to fuel wars and unspeakable violence, we must engage each other in honest conversation, lean into the discomfort, and push ourselves to action. We also need to commit ourselves to greater racial and ethnic diversity in our membership for in these areas, we are still a mostly white congregation. When facing these issues within and outside of our community, we often believe that change is a wholly serious and sometimes painful process. But we should remember that once we get to the multicultural promised land, we might find ourselves enjoying and even laughing at the enlightenment we derive from diversity.

Take my family's varied methods of naming relatives. Emma and Thomas call their grandparents, Nana and Poppop Un, Grandpa and Nana G, and Grammy and Jim-jim. Their uncles and aunts have less colorful names, but the names they know and have known ever since they could talk. Uncle Aaron is just that: Aaron. Auntie Beth is Beth or one of Thomas' green Ts. When I was a kid, I didn't know the names of my relatives. To be honest, even now, I still don't know their names. Embarrassingly enough, Julie knows their names far better than me. I do, however, know where my relatives live. When my aunt from New York called, she would first speak Korean, change tact when she realized it was me (the one who couldn't speak Korean, tsk, tsk), and then in broken English, proclaim, "This is Staten Island calling." Finding it awkward to reply, "Hello, Staten Island," I would rush to the nearest parent and hand over the phone. My favorite was Anaheim Achie (or Uncle Anaheim); I guess these days he would be the Los Angeles Achie of Anaheim.

Sometimes when several aunts or uncles lived in the same locale, we would work out a system for distinguishing relatives. Leopard skin auntie was the somewhat flamboyant aunt who sold cigarettes and wigs and wouldn't be caught dead dressed in subtleties. Dung-dung achie was just that; he was dung-dung or fat. While you might think that "fat" is a cruel adjective for a name, it's far better than "Uncle 12 Year old scotch"

I don't think I ever questioned why we didn't use given names. I inherently knew that to use given names was to emphasize individuality over family affiliation. To this day, my relatives still refer to me as Chong's youngest son, never ever Young. We might view this as too old world or just plain different; I like the idea of always being thought of as my father's son.

Diversity can also lead to some funny and very human misunderstandings. I remember always being aware that the words my parents taught me might not be quite correct. I also knew that they might have forgotten to teach me certain phrases. To this day, I still think of myself not as a native speaker of English but as fluent in English. There is a subtle difference, a difference well understood by my childhood best friend, Steve Searl. Steve lived two doors down. The first time I spent more than a few minutes in the Searl house, I distinctly remember looking at Mrs. Searl, not knowing what to call her. I had never learned that she was MRS. Searle. Knowing that I had not a clue, she gently looked at me and said, "Call me Mrs. Searle." She put a soft emphasis on the "Mrs." She then gave me a freshly baked piece of white bread with Amish whipped butter, a wonderful treat since my mother never baked and had no idea who the Amish were.

Sometimes my parents did teach me words but with a slight and sometimes embarrassing twist. For the longest time, I used to take my dirty clothes to the humper. I remember going to the Searls and hearing Mrs. Searl call the humper the hamper. Since she was an English major from a prestigious women's college, I went with hamper. Funnily enough, my mother, a very stubborn woman, stuck with humper. I guess acculturation and assimilation need not always result in truth or accuracy but with falling into and sticking with a comfortable pattern.

Sometimes these mistakes are refreshing rather than embarrassing. I went to a fairly stuffy private school for high school and played soccer there. The crowds, mostly parents, were polite and well-versed in the manners of the well-to-do. My mother, on the other hand, cared about one thing and one thing only: victory. Playing left midfield meant that I would spend at least half the game running near the home stands. I can still kind of see my mother standing (she is 4'11") yelling, "Kill him. Steal the ball. Kill him. Get him." She could have cared less that my friends' mothers and fathers thought that her behavior was pretty appalling. While humper v. hamper is about ignorance, "kill him" v. politeness is about passion and love of child.

Sometimes those who are interested in racial and ethnic diversity focus on the exotic and the most glaring differences. I am always a bit amused when someone asks my mother for the secret ingredient to her dishes, like her famous marinated chicken. Some of the ingredients, like the scallion, are obvious to the eye. But other subtler flavors confuse. People are often surprised when they hear from my mother that the most important ingredient in her famous chicken is not one found in an Asian market or shipped from Korea, but it is Mrs. Butterworth's maple syrup product. I can't help but be amused to see the somewhat disappointed looks. I think sometimes we want difference to be exotic and unusual rather than something that's not different at all. What is interesting is that this resourceful woman has adjusted to her new home without sacrificing all that she knows and loves.

Part of the mission of Unity Church and of UUism is to embrace diversity. Often embracing diversity requires soul-searching, personal transformation, conflict, and fundamental growth. Embracing racial and ethnic diversity, however, need not be so dramatic or tense. Sometimes it can be funny, light, or embarrassing. Funny doesn't mean superficial. Sometimes a convergence of two cultures results in something both humorous and profoundly revelatory. After all, how many of you knew before this sermon that Spam was a Korean delicacy?

And now let's enjoy each other's voices, even if a bit off key, when we sing hymn ____.