

Embracing Diversity in Consensus

By Tehom

(an edited version of an earlier article "My Way or the Highway" that appeared in *Lady Letter*, vol. 6, no. 1)

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Diversity seems to be one of the buzzwords of the 90s. Finally the corporate world, human resources departments, and the media are beginning to catch up with nature! Diversity is a key factor in replenishing the planet. Life forms adapt, adjust, and express their creative urges within the biosphere in innumerable ways; if they didn't, all life forms would soon die out. (One can only hope this downward spiral of sameness will hasten the demise of a condition rampant in America, *stripmallus identicalus*: the deadly suburban development condition that causes Pizza Huts, Starbuck's, and RiteAids to spring up overnight along the blue highways that lead from where you live to where you work.) Diversity is the "continuance of the species," if I may morph the original Darwinian phrase.

Although biologically similar, we *Homo Sapiens* are unique units residing in our individual physical containers. As single "units" we travel independently, six odd billion hearts beating to one personal rhythm or another. How we appear, walk, is an expression of our individuality. Dying one's hair orange and blue, piercing body parts, or buying that Armani suit you've always wanted are ways of expressing your individual style. Different unit, different set of fingerprints.

But what makes me even more unique than my social security number ever can are my invisible calling cards: Call them mind, soul, creativity, ethics, personality, psyche, unconscious, or what you will, these are the intangible sparks that animate my totally unique being. It's what makes me tick, and it's a different kind of tick than yours.

Along with this big hooah about my diversity comes the responsibility of respecting everyone else's diversity. When I let you be you while I am happy being me (remember Marlo Thomas?), this system works. But if I were to insist that my way is more appropriate than yours and try to force my belief system on you, well, I'm not a beautiful unit anymore, but a narrow-minded, pushy, ignorant, power-hungry, narcissistic asshole (why use lots of words when one will do: Republican). The "my way or the highway" approach doesn't impress me much. Without pounding the floorboards to dust, I think you get the idea. If you are excited to celebrate your diversity, you should be excited about ensuring that others have the same joyous space in which to celebrate theirs. This is not to say that lively crosstalk or disagreement is unwelcome, it's to say that coercion and manipulation are not. Exchanging ideas is one of the best ways to stretch yourself and grow. Many times I find that the conversation that leaves me feeling a little pinched is the one that makes me think the most, the one that I return to and get something from. (I personally think that if you interact with only those people *who always agree with you*, you are on a slippery slope to 3rd degree Stepford Wife initiation.) But if I feel something is being rammed down my throat, I shut down or become irrationally LOUD. I find that screaming is not a very useful communication tool, but it does clear the throat chakra. Ahem.

While the action of one individual can change the course of history (Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of John Kennedy and Gerald Gardner's publication of *Witchcraft Today* both had a big impact), it is more likely that groups will make an impact more quickly and effectively, or simply get a big job done more easily. Besides, there is a basic emotional/social need for union, too.

Imagine that you are floating in space, and an infinite number of mirrors surround you. Each mirror reflects all the other mirrors. Among all the mirrors, running in all directions, are connecting strands of thread; you are at the center of an immense web. The web, reflected in

the mirrors, into infinity, echoes every movement you make. This image, known as Indra's Web, illustrates how interconnected we are, even in our individuality.

This connectedness is what makes us feel like we have come home when we find like-minded people with whom we can share our spirituality. Hugging yourself will never quite approximate a good "bear" hug. Having a kind friend who listens to you while you work out a particularly thorny problem is far better than talking to a tape recorder.

To get jobs done, find camaraderie, and for a billion other reasons, diverse individuals often join organizations. They put aside some of their individualism in the spirit of cooperation and unity. They share power rather than dominating the scene or making a bold impression. The goals of the group become more important than doing it "right," another variation on the "my way/highway" approach.

Like the earlier Marlo Thomas model, the same mutual respect should exist among groups. For example, the Covenant of the Goddess's Code of Ethics state that "Every person associated with this Covenant shall respect the autonomy and sovereignty of each coven, as well as the right of each coven to oversee the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical development of its members and students in its own way, and shall exercise reasonable caution against infringing upon that right in any way." No member group has the right to influence or dictate any other member groups' rules, laws, practices, or programs. I don't see how this could be any other way. Of course not everyone agrees with this, and that's OK. It's a Good Thing. In fact, even though I support this policy, I acknowledge that there might be a time when I *wished* I did have some influence over another group's policies. But that's not how it works: I choose to support the autonomy policy because I think it serves the overall group well. I may not always agree with it, but that's OK.

Sometimes radical individuality just doesn't cut it; sometimes being subsumed in total group mind doesn't cut it either. By embracing diversity within consensus, we preserve our autonomy while being able to accomplish great things as a group that is committed to a common goal.