



What do we gain from Diversity?

Maria Hayward © 21 June 2026

Pride month earlier this year got me thinking – thinking about diversity. And I remembered a comment my daughter had made to me when she was maybe 8 or 9 years old.

I was doing that thing that a lot of working mothers (and some fathers) have to do – which is to sometimes take your kids to work with you during the school holidays. While we were entering the security gate at the Refugee Centre (my workplace), I stopped to briefly chat with a staff member about the new intake of families. A few minutes later, my daughter made an interesting comment that I have never forgotten: “You’re so lucky”, she said, “that you have a job where you get to talk to so many different types of people”. I thought about that comment for quite a while and wondered what she, as a young child, might have been thinking.

“You are so lucky that you have a job where you get to talk to so many different types of people”.... The person I had been chatting was from the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC. We didn’t have many African-background people in NZ at that time and maybe it was his starkly different appearance and skin colour that got her thinking. But she said I was ‘**lucky**’. What did she ‘see’ that prompted this comment?

And then I thought, **yes**, I am lucky, **we** are lucky

- We **are** lucky if we have diversity in our lives

and we **are also lucky**, I suppose, if that diversity is so much part of our lives that

- we can communicate comfortably with people who **are diverse**

I wonder if my daughter **saw** how our lives are enriched, are more interesting, with diversity. Maybe she did, probably she didn't. But I **do** think we're **lucky** if we have the opportunity to interact with a multiplicity of people, and also if we are able to gain an **array** of skills which broaden the **range** of people we can easily and joyfully communicate with. I think this does make our lives that much more exciting, more vibrant, and generally just more fabulous. And I mean this to be with any form of diversity – not just ethnic or linguistic.

This year, as Unitarians, we've heard from speakers like Keola Whittaker who shared how everyone gains from being in touch with diverse gender identities and orientations. In February, Tof Eklund gave us an insight into the world of being non-binary. In another service, Nicki talked to us about neuro diversity and being neuro-divergent.

And going back over the past year, as Unitarians, we've also heard from a really wide range of people from diverse communities. We experienced in very real terms the fear felt by Pacific Island New Zealanders during the violent and immoral dawn raids of the 1970's (prescient somehow, tragically, of the ICE raids in the US today). Back then, in Aotearoa, there were **twice as many** 'white' overstayers (from Europe and the USA) than there were Pacific Island overstayers, but only brown people were targeted, and just like in the US today, the NZ police

frequently made errors and interrogated or stopped brown-skinned people who were either born in New Zealand or who were here legitimately.

Last year we also had pagan services and we listened to Muslim Imams, a Zen Buddhist, and we heard from our own lay leaders on a range of diverse issues and human rights perspectives. After almost all of these services, the discussion and reflections afterwards were equally stimulating and enlightening for me. The demographic in our Auckland Unitarian rōpū is not very diverse, but we do get to hear about a wide range of diversities in our services.

I am grateful to all the speakers who have challenged us over the last year. This is what a good church or religion does, in my opinion. We might sometimes have been taken out of our comfort zones but I think, I hope, that in listening to this diverse group of speakers, you and I were also left feeling a little less afraid, a little more joyful about what is different and heterogeneous in our lives.

But I also think we have to be careful not to become complacent. Just a couple of days ago, Brian Tamaki called for the purging of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from Aotearoa. He also suggested burning mosques and temples. I was with a Muslim Imam on a course last week. He returned after Friday prayers in a state of **great distress and fear**. We have to stand alongside our brothers and sisters in instances like this. Even though we all know that Tamaki is a pathetic little man, I have heard so many stories of refugees being attacked verbally and physically after statements like this. This is really dangerous behaviour and minority groups need allies.

Returning to the notion of 'lucky'. Including members of minority groups or diverse backgrounds, cultures, genders etc, imbues in us, more **mature** attitudes towards others; it also expands our ability to **be more inclusive and welcoming**. **And** we become less fearful – which leads to less stress in our lives and, importantly, less bigotry in our communities. I believe we become better persons. If there are enough of us, society becomes better: more inclusive and welcoming and richer and healthier.

And, did you know that, diverse communities are also more economically advantaged? There is science that attests to the positive gains of diversity. A tranche of academic studies (esp. [McKinsey et al](#)) indicate that diverse work teams are up to 35% more productive, 19% more innovative, and 87% better at making business decisions. That's a massive economic advantage. I'll repeat those stats: up to 35% more productive, 19% more innovative, [and 87% better at making business decisions](#). I recall the HR manager of Beca (a large Auckland engineering company) saying in an RNZ interview, that they were aware of these studies and also that engineering companies were notoriously dominated by males. She mentioned that they were actively looking to recruit more gender, sexuality and ethnically diverse candidates – they were actually interested in a whole range of diversities. Diversity is better for business! It's a shame that in the Beca case, **profit** was the reason and not **humanity** – but still ... (maybe there was some humanity in there too, and if not, their more diverse workforce might just expand this too!). I also noticed in a social media post yesterday that Deloitte's have an inclusion and diversity award. They must've read the research too.

I think it's pretty obvious that diverse cultures make our communities more vibrant, and they certainly make our cuisine more delicious! If we didn't

have migrants as well as people travelling in and out of our motu, we might not have: pizza, salami or flat whites from Italy; German rye and sourdough bread; French pastries, wines like Riesling from Germany, pinots from France and shiraz originally from Iran – and then there's Dutch and French cheeses, Chinese green tea, sushi, tacos, curry and so on. I'm sure you're also thinking of so many more additions to our cuisine from abroad. Ok, some products are just imported, but they are here as the result of people travelling, migrating and experiencing **diversity**.

And then there are lots of other forms of diversity in Aotearoa: perhaps African hair braiding and festivals such as Diwali and Chinese New Year, and all the art, literature and even architecture from ngā hau e whā (faraway lands).

We have a Unitarian principle that mentions the search for truth and meaning. Whenever we encounter diversity in meaningful ways, our vision and our minds are expanded, we are enriched. We are on that journey towards improved understanding and open-mindedness. I often consider the most interesting cities in the world are the most diverse cities: New York, London, Paris, Sydney, Berlin, Amsterdam.... and more.

And did you know that Auckland is the second most diverse city in the world (after Toronto) – we have the second highest number of **different** ethnicities living in this city. Also, 42% of Aucklanders were not born here - some of you are sitting here today (or listening in). According to population experts (and the recent census), by 2048, one third of all New Zealanders will be of Asian descent (isn't that great!). Auckland currently has 28.2% of people who identify as Asian. About 18% are Māori, just under 10% Pasifika and almost 2% are MELAA (middle eastern, Latin

American and African). With the projected increase in the Asian population – that will mean over 60% of NZ'ers will be brown or brown-ish. Will that make us less racist? Possibly not, but maybe it will - if we work on modelling inclusive language and opening our minds and hearts. Our diversity is something to **relish** and be proud of and its pretty cool!

On the other hand, a fearful society might decide to deem diverse individuals as inferior, or a burden, or dangerous or unwanted. Some politicians capitalise on this fear, blaming minority groups for things like: unemployment levels, crime, and even economic downturns. A society might then start to persecute, criminalise, and hurt this group.

But, once we start actually **mixing** with and **listening** to people who are diverse, we **tend to lose** all those anxieties and prejudices. I would even suggest, we are happier (or luckier, as my daughter suggested all those years ago).

I think it might be useful to just remind ourselves of some of the ways we can be diverse: The NZ Human Rights Commission lists: marital status; religious belief; ethical belief (our values); skin colour; race; ethnicity or nationality; disability; age; political opinion; employment status; family status and, finally, of course, sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual and so on). Additionally, there is diversity in gender identification (transgender, intersex, non-binary or gender fluid) and also neurodiversity, i.e a neurotypical majority and neurodivergence. These last two categories are sadly not included in New Zealand human rights legislation and therefore these groups are not legally protected from discrimination.

People who are **fearful of diversity** (and generally uninformed too) lean towards governments that use those **fears** to garner support and votes. These politicians might tell people that they will **protect** them from the false claims they themselves have promulgated about diverse minority groups. Currently, groups like Pauline Hansen's "One Nation" party in Australia, Brian Tamaki with his hate speech about individuals of Indian background, and Winstone Peters with his anti-woke, anti-trans rhetoric - these groups are rapidly gaining popularity.

In contrast, an inclusive, compassionate leader, Zohran Mamdani (the new mayor of New York) is also extremely popular: "New York is a city of immigrants", he said, "built by immigrants, powered by immigrants, and now, led by an immigrant" – and a Muslim immigrant to boot!" And who voted for him – a very well-informed, educated (or well-read) and woke population. And he has managed to get rid of a huge chunk of New York's debt by taxing the extremely wealthy and collecting unpaid traffic fines from Amazon. He put the money towards health and education and other social services. Murders in the city have reduced by 21%, shootings are at an all-time low and major crime is down 6.2%. Just as an aside, I'll quote something from a commentator on Instagram: It appears that reducing crime has nothing to do with building more prisons, but a lot more to do with improving health and education services. Apparently Mamdani walks around New York without bodyguards – his allies say he is so loved, he is not in danger.

Having facts **as well as** empathy matter. A community that is not fearful of diversity is a community that experiences and acknowledges the benefits of diversity.

Here are some interesting things/facts, that science also tells us about the benefits of diversity (you can look these up if you want to):

- understanding other cultures promotes your intelligence, verbal fluency, and problem-solving skills
- rangatahi (young people) who speak **more than one language** are more likely to gain better results at tertiary education level, especially in areas requiring problem-solving, reading comprehension and maths.

Research states that they have increased “cognitive flexibility” and “faster cognitive processing”. Apparently, the connections in the brain that occur when a person is bilingual (or trilingual) are very useful for the higher-level thinking required at university level. Playing the piano creates this result too (right and left-brain connections and brain and both hands working concomitantly). Is this true, Frank?

Let me see if I can round up by connecting these thoughts on diversity with our own rōpū, our own group. Unitarian Universalism actually has **Diversity** as a core value. All gender identities and sexual orientations are welcome and embraced. All religions, peoples from all nations and ethnicities are also embraced. All languages, abilities and disabilities and the diversities listed previously are welcome – even if not actually represented. Where we are not **diverse**, is in our values – these we hold **in common**. Interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity and equity. And when you think about it, **all** of these are connected to diversity. Interdependence lets us know we need and benefit from one another. Pluralism and diversity are very similar notions. Justice is about fairness to everyone – regardless of their difference. Transformation talks about the change that happens within us when we

learn more, feel more, and experience more broadly. Generosity is about opening our hearts and minds, and equity, as you know, is about supporting groups or individuals, especially those in minority or marginalised groups, so that they get **equal** opportunities to those who are more **privileged** in a community.

Whilst some politicians encourage and promote racist or sexist or homophobic and transphobic attitudes, others are wonderful leaders and role models. You'll all remember Dame Jacinda Adern's famous words after the Christchurch Mosque killings: "We are one. They are us," she proclaimed, emphasizing unity and not division. Dame Jenny Shipley, (from the other main party) too, has shown real leadership in her public comments on Diversity. "We want people to bring their cultures with them", she said. Adding that, in this way, "they become threads of a rope that bind us together." In fact, there is a rather well-known whakatauki (Māori proverb) that also says more or less exactly that. It goes like this:

- [Whiria te taura here tāngata](#) – *Bind together the strands of humanity*. This proverb highlights the strength found in diversity, comparing people to different strands that, when woven together, form a sturdy, unbreakable rope.

That's a nice way to think about diversity.

I'd like to finish with another whakatauki about diversity. There are just so many – which actually tells us something about the **valuing of diversity** in our first culture (not something the colonisers valued – but I'll talk about that another time). For now, I'd like to conclude with the following:

- Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi (also mentioned by Alix a fortnight ago) – *With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive*. This proverb speaks to collaboration and the value of diversity in skills and resources, where combining different contributions benefits everyone.

No reira, kua mutu tenei whaikorero. And on that note, I conclude today's reflective kōrero.

Meditation / Discussion Question

- Share a diversity story or comment with your group.