

UU PRINCIPLES I: JUSTICE!

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I used to think I knew what Justice was, or at least I had a pretty good idea about it. Every age has its own complexities, but the world in which I grew up seemed simpler than the world we now share, with right and wrong more easily distinguished. Not that I didn't quickly learn how many gray areas there are in life, but many of the injustices seemed easier to spot. Growing up in a religiously and politically liberal home and church, I was raised learning about racism and the importance of accepting those who were different from me. Growing up in a home with 2 engineers who designed water and sewage treatment systems but also very much enjoyed the natural world, I was also early aware of many of the ecological problems and injustices that plague our world. Justice in a world heading toward 8 Billion people is very different from justice in a world of a few hundred million people.

The values behind our Unitarian Universalist Principles are all about Justice. Each of our 7 Principles has a component of Justice, some more explicit, but each helping to illustrate the importance of Justice to the representatives of congregations who voted for our most important statement of beliefs almost 30 years ago in 2 successive UUA General Assemblies. A review of the Principles and Statement of Living Tradition conducted a few years ago by the UUA Commission on Appraisal suggested changes which were voted down, in part because

they were presented in an all or nothing proposal which many of us found unacceptable. Some day there will be changes to the Principles and the Statement of Living Tradition, but it has not yet happened.

Because of the importance of Justice within our UU Association and congregations, there usually has been some kind of project or demonstration for justice at General Assembly over the last several years. Though it was cast as an opportunity to witness for justice, the support of General Assembly for WaterFire Providence, a celebration of the arts downtown, one night during GA seemed more PR than a substantial exhibition of our commitment to justice. Don't get me started on the fundraiser for rappelling down the side of the Convention Center!

On a somewhat more significant note for Justice, delegates to General Assembly chose *Escalating Inequality* as the Congregational Study Action Issue to be referred to UU congregations for consideration over the next 4 years with a hope of developing a new statement of conscience. This CSAI was prepared and supported by Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community, an advocacy group organized around 20 years ago. Among other things, over the years UUJEC has sponsored and promoted the lectures and writings of David Korten including *The Great Turning*, *Agenda for a New Economy*, and *Yes! Magazine*. There will soon be a study guide on the new CSAI, *Escalating Inequality*, and I will invite anyone interested to join the discussion of how we might get involved in or continue work on some of the issues within that general area of concern.

Long before UUs voted in the current set of Principles, Unitarians and Universalists were engaged in work for Social Justice as abolitionists, suffragists, and advocates for civil rights and social justice in education, the workforce, housing markets, and generally throughout our society and economy. UUs have long been concerned about racism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism, and other evidences of injustice in our own land and around the world. Some UUs have even addressed the class issues which tend to remain part of our Unitarian Universalist shadow as well

as problems throughout our supposedly classless society. Other UUs have been strong advocates for peace, acceptance and understanding of all people and all religions, ecological justice and respect, and other critical issues of their and our time. For our relatively small numbers, Unitarian Universalists have made a lot of noise and actually accomplished much in the effort to build a healthier, more just, and sustainable world community.

I want to take a few minutes to think about the commitment to justice in our UU Principles:

Affirming and Promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person; the call to justice of our first principle can be one of the most challenging things that Unitarian Universalists face. A few years back, the discussion of our first principle usually resulted in the challenge to respect Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein or some mass murderer. I would typically respond on the basis of inherent worth as the potential in all human beings to be or do good, uncontaminated by whatever realities and eventualities which resulted in the evil accomplished by such persons. Beyond that discussion of evil, the core call to justice of the first principle is to practice respect for all persons, for everyone we meet, even the unlovable, the unwashed, and the folks that annoy us for obvious or no apparent reasons. The first principle is about Respect with a capital R, respect for each person without regard to color, shape, age, sex, gender expression, or differing abilities.

Affirming and Promoting Justice, equity and compassion in human relations, our second UU Principle, expands and explains that commitment to respect, calling us to do more than merely think or talk about all persons with respect, but to actually do something. We are called to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion; to work to bring about justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. It is not enough to just say the words, we are called to do what we can to make a difference, to reshape our world with justice, equity, and compassion. Life is a journey and few individuals have the power to make the whole

world change, but each of us can make an impact and the cumulative effect of our mutual efforts will help to turn the scales, to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

Affirming and Promoting Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; our third principle continues to emphasize the importance of respect as acceptance and goes on to encourage spiritual growth. For some the practice of justice is a spiritual discipline.

Affirming and Promoting A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; our fourth principle proclaims that all persons ought to be free to responsibly search out their own sense of truth and meaning. This further elaborates the idea of respect and applies it to matters of ultimate meaning, recognizing that there are many paths up the mountain of truth and meaning and that each person ought to be free to discover his or her own perspective as long as it does not result in harm to others.

Affirming and Promoting The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; our fifth principle, is about personal integrity, shared decision making, and using democratic processes with justice and equity. It perhaps should call for the right and responsibility of conscience, for our consciences often lay a moral obligation upon us to act according to our best understanding of a situation. A truly democratic process is often messy, but more just than even a representative democracy can be. Democracy calls for each member to have a voice and vote in each decision. Sometimes in our congregations we delegate day to day decisions to an elected board and officers, but we practice bare democracy in the major decisions of our congregations!

Affirming and Promoting The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; our sixth principle calls for justice in a global community. This principle suggests that our values be applied globally, not just in our congregations or in our own society. The values expressed in this principle are the foundation for much of the effort to export

democracy and acceptance around the globe. Our Unitarian forebears helped to shape the foundational documents and beliefs of our nation as well as our movement. This notion of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all is an expression of hope that someday all persons around the world shall live with hope, that all will someday have food and shelter and meaningful work, that all persons shall have enough. The work of UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, is aimed at shaping such a world. Though it is not as large or effective as some other organizations, it works effectively according to UU values to provide direct assistance and to bring about changes for the better within the nations of the world.

Affirming and Promoting Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, our seventh principle, may be the most important of all for the future of humanity and of our planet. This is the principle which expresses our commitment to ecological justice, recognizing that we are all in this together. Sometimes I wish that the first and seventh principles even more clearly mentioned the plants and animals of the natural world, though I believe that they certainly are included in the web of all existence. This principle extends our commitment beyond the people of the world, beyond even the surface of earth, to encompass and embrace all existence and acknowledge ourselves as part of earth's community rather than as the separately endowed dominators. We ought to think of ourselves as brothers and sisters of all living things, guardians and protectors rather than controllers and exploiters. Human beings have made a mess of the earth, possibly causing irreparable harm. The effects of global warming, deforestation, pollution, overpopulation, extermination of animals and plants, and other collateral damage from human development over the past 3 centuries have wreaked havoc on the natural world. Not enough has yet been accomplished to begin to mitigate the effects of global warming, though the worst damage may afflict all future generations of the human animal far more than it affects us. At its best, this seventh principle reminds us of our connections to all humans, plants, and animals, to all things. We are all connected, we are the inhabitants of

this planet and sisters and brothers of all life wherever it may exist. Whatever injustice we may practice will affect all existence, as will whatever justice we practice.

These then are our seven principles, seven declarations of our commitment to justice, seven expressions of the core of our Unitarian Universalist beliefs in the call for justice. These same principles also call us to compassion and to community, topics I will be addressing in coming weeks. These principles constitute neither creed nor doctrine, nor are new UUs generally required to accept them, though they do constitute the things that we most generally believe. In a world constantly changing, these inherently changeable principles have stood unchanged for almost 30 years. In coming years, I expect that new phrasing will someday replace many of these words, but the values and beliefs expressed by these principles lie at the core of Unitarian Universalism. Our beliefs in the value of persons, the need for respect, the importance of justice, equity, compassion, and community are well expressed for now in these words.

I invite and challenge you to think about these principles this week and this month. How are you living by these principles, how could you do more to express your belief in these principles!

Shalom, Salaam, and So may it be! Amen!