

LIVING BY PRINCIPLE

A couple of years back I recall that there were several stories in the media about a fellow who had decided to see what it would be like to live by all the hundreds of Jewish laws. I heard part of one of the interviews of A. J. Jacobs, about his book, The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible. Jacobs has taken on other challenges, but it is an interesting, though not terribly appealing thought to try living by all of the rules of the Jewish law.

Fortunately for Unitarian Universalists who try to live by Principle, we have only 7, though they are really pretty all-encompassing if you think about it. I expect that most of us actually do try to live by those 7 Principles as well as we can, but we probably don't think often enough about how to apply them in our daily lives.

I can't get them word perfect and in order without looking, but the 7 UU Principles that we covenant to affirm and promote are:

- 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.

The principles are written in humanistic language, though they are closely connected to the statement of our Living Tradition, which cites the many religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions which have and do influence Unitarian Universalism. Both segments are from the by-laws of the UUA.

If we take time to regularly read the 7 Principles, it helps to remind us of the core values of Unitarian Universalism. There are also a couple of children's versions of the Principles. As a tradition that abhors creeds, doctrine, and dogma, the Principles at least give us a statement that describes our most widely shared values and intentions in the world. Few of us may succeed in living by all of the Principles every day, but we do aspire to live by the values elaborated in the 7 Unitarian Universalist Principles.

The Principles have both breadth and depth. They are descriptive of our intentions in all our individual relationships and encounters, but they also describe our hopes for the world and our respect for and our acceptance of our place within the interconnected web of life in the universe. The Principles address our interactions with others within our UU Congregations and our hopes for society. The Principles address the importance of our own search for truth and meaning and our commitment to respect the journeys of others. The Principles say well what we hope and intend, but they are not forever cast in stone nor even concrete. The Principles have evolved from previous statements on both sides of our Unitarian Universalist heritage, voted into existence almost 3 decades ago. They will in time be changed to better reflect the language and understandings of future generations, for Unitarian Universalism continues to grow and evolve.

As some of you have heard me say, I am not sure I like some of the ways that this movement seems to be changing currently, but fortunately each congregation and every member and minister has the right and obligation to search out his or her own truth. In this congregational polity that we practice, beliefs and individual practices are not dictated by Pope, Bishop, Presbytery, or Presiding Officer. Each congregation makes only such rules and laws as it sees necessary, and few attempt to limit the beliefs of any member, though many congregations have established behavioral covenants for the good of the community and individuals within. Because of these freedoms we practice, we are rarely confused with "organized religions!" Actually we are organized, but in very different ways from either the Episcopal or Presbyterian traditions! In fact we have only limited similarities to many other congregationally organized churches, such as the Baptists. We are closer to the UCC, sometimes referred to as Unitarians considering Christ!

The emphasis on justice, equality, acceptance, and encouragement for our own searches for truth and meaning doesn't make us entirely different from every other religious tradition, but it provides an opportunity for us to offer a uniquely supportive community for those whose journeys lead them away from the ordinary. Most religious communities have boundaries that many of us have crossed on our way toward Unitarian Universalism. By the time we find ourselves in Unitarian Universalism most of us don't have other religious or spiritual communities where we can truly feel comfortable. Most of us have left several religious labels behind us along the way. Few who have found their way to Unitarian Universalism return to ordinary religious communities.

My disappointment over the direction that some would take Unitarian Universalism is to make us just another spiritual community when we have been so much more. Some who come to Unitarian Universalism are seeking a spiritual community that is accepting, and we can offer that. To deny our humanist and activist heritage and our inclusion of Buddhist and Pagan influences however would be to deny also much of what has made Unitarian Universalist unique in the last century. I don't really see us returning to even the early 19th Century "Unitarian Christianity" of William Ellery Channing any time soon, but I do believe that we could get lost among the near Christian spiritual groups such as Unity, with which we are already often confused, if we continue to emphasize spirituality above all else.

I have long believed that the Unitarian Universalism described in our 7 Principles and our Living Tradition sources is a unique religious tradition, no longer tied to Christianity nor ever substantially affiliated with Judaism, Buddhism, Paganism, Humanism, or any other tradition from which we draw inspiration. Though our roots are in Christianity, we have come too far to call ourselves a Christian Denomination. We have some similarities to Baha'i but are far too rooted in Western culture, democracy and philosophy and humanism to join that much larger Eastern expression of religious inclusion and acceptance. We just aren't quite like anything else on the religious spectrum, and we will lose and disappoint some people because we continue to hold onto liberally religious and culturally inclusive and accepting ideas that make us activists for several progressive causes.

Since we each follow our own consciences as well as our individual interests, we support and work for many good causes as individuals but we have a more difficult time finding one or two causes on which to focus as a congregation. Our radical individualism clashes with our communitarian commitment even in matters of principle!

I suspect that generally we are very good at respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person and practicing justice, equity, and compassion in all of our personal relationships and interactions with others. We are pretty good at democracy, though we sometimes take more time than we might to listen to minority voices on issues. I think that generally we value the variety of our differing paths and journeys so it is easy for us to encourage each other to explore and discover meaning so long as our practices do no harm.

We are not as successful at taking our show on the road, taking public stands for our sometimes unpopular beliefs, taking the lead on progressive causes that may not have the support of our friends and neighbors. When we can stand together with larger groups of UUs at General Assembly and in other gatherings we find courage to speak, march, and demonstrate for what we believe, but without the larger UU community we are sometimes hard put to stand up for what we truly believe. This is one of the challenges we must continue to face if we are to help build a world better than the one in which we now live.

Living by Principle may call us to do very different things in differing settings. It is hard to respect the worth and dignity of some people who harm others. It is hard to treat those who perpetrate and perpetuate injustice and inequality with compassion. It is hard to deal democratically with those who do not recognize the democratic process. Living by Principle may at times mean choosing the best among a series of choices that are unpalatable and might at other times even be unacceptable. Our principles and the values behind them are guides rather than rules or laws. To live by Principle is to do the best we can to practice a life of compassion and justice, a life recognizing the needs of persons and especially reaching out to help those who are unable to speak or stand up for themselves.

Living by Principle is the impetus for the Standing on the Side of Love campaigns, efforts of the UU California Legislative Ministry and other UU efforts and groups seeking to bring about change that is just and compassionate. Since the earliest days of organization in this country, Unitarians and Universalists have struggled to bring about a better society, to care for those in need, to end injustice, sexism and racism. Though not always united in opinion, Unitarians and Universalists have sought to create a better world through better living and working conditions for all.

From 1845-59, Transcendentalist Unitarian Theodore Parker preached about injustice, abolition, and the reform of society, drawing crowds in the thousands, he was the best known preacher of his day in Boston. His words inspired Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. Though he died far too young in 1860, Parker gave his all to live by the values that underlie our Principles. Like hundreds and thousands of other Unitarians and Universalists in the history of our movement, Parker exemplifies the effort to Live by Principle.

We may not face the challenges that Parker and other leaders of our movement have faced, but each of us can make a difference in our efforts to Live by Principle. Who knows what persons might be inspired by our words or actions? Who knows what good we may accomplish when we are Living by Principle? We may not be a large movement, we may not be well known as individuals, we may not feel like we can do much, but by the life we model we may make a far bigger difference than we can imagine.

I have often been discouraged feeling like nothing I have done has been enough, but every once in a while I hear from someone who has been touched by something I have said or done, who has found courage to Live the Principles and I remember why I do my best to Live the Principles!

We have no creed, no doctrine, no dogma, but we have the 7 Principles that call us to live the best life we can, respecting and accepting others and doing what we can to shape a better world. We don't have rules or laws to meet every situation, but we have the Principles that challenge us to discover our own sense of meaning, our own truth, to follow our own journey, to use all the gifts we have been given to respond in the best possible way.

May these principles and those that will someday replace them continue to inspire us to Live Principled lives that will make a difference to all those we encounter while helping to create a better world!

So may it Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Amen!