

UU PRINCIPLES, PURPOSE, and TRADITION Part I

UU Values

How many of you remember participating in some kind of Values Clarification Workshop? I participated in and then led several such experiences at youth camps and retreats, and for several congregations. I haven't heard that process mentioned for some time, but I remember that it was a really helpful way to look at ethical decision-making. I suspect that when the so-called Moral Majority became prominent with their hijacking of Family Values, liberals stopped talking about values.

Our 7 Unitarian Universalist Principles are all about values, ethics, and morality. They are far more an expression of our ethical values than they are a religious statement or creed per se. They are the statement of values that most UUs can affirm and they have been in place for over 30 years, rather amazing in a tradition which also affirms the importance of change within human society. A few years back the UUA Commission on Appraisal proposed changes to the Principles and our Statement of Living Tradition, which were voted down in large part because they were presented in all or nothing format, not allowing for even helpful amendments. At some point I'm sure both statements will be changed, hopefully to reflect a better understanding of UU beliefs and the world.

In this August series of sermons on the UU Principles, Purposes and Living Tradition, I intend to share some thoughts about the content and history of these statements as well as about how I see them providing wisdom for our individual journeys and for the Unitarian Universalist movement here in the 2nd decade of the 21st Century of the Common Era! These statements as they currently stand were approved by the General Assembly in 1985 as Article II section C2.1 of the UUA by-laws, a section requiring at least a two-year process with high majorities and likely referral to a study commission before any changes happen.

The UU Principles express the values that we share and which bind us together in common cause.

We value personhood as expressed in the first principle's affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Not that people are only good but that there is good in each person, an essence present from the start of life and discernible in at least some of the actions of every individual throughout their life. Valuing each person breaks down barriers of race, gender, status, and wealth. As we affirm the value of each person, it becomes much harder to continue categorical prejudices.

Our second principle affirms and promotes justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We value justice, equal treatment, and compassion in all human interactions. This principle leads us to work against the injustices of our society, to care for persons who are ill-treated or in need, to seek to love all persons. This principle also calls forth acceptance of individuals and challenges us to treat each person with compassion and justice, and to call for real justice throughout society, and especially in regard to arrests, shootings by police, the courts and prisons. Our first and second principles challenge us to affirm that Black Lives Matter in order to balance the societal assumption that white lives matter the most.

Our third principle calls us to accept and encourage one another in our congregations. I take that to mean that we make an effort to welcome all persons who come into our congregations and seek to encourage them as they proceed upon their journeys of life and faith. We value acceptance and we value personal growth.

Our fourth principle affirms and promotes a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We value freedom, we value responsible action, we value truth and truth-telling, and we value the process of discovering a sense of meaning. Sometimes UUs have practiced that idea of freedom as meaning everyone can do whatever he or she wants with no boundaries, but there is always a boundary where harm is done to others.

This principle is really about our quest for meaning, that it not be limited by creed, preconception, or other prejudice. That we are really free to explore and discover whatever we need to in order to find meaning!

Our fifth principle affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. We value the wisdom of the individual conscience and would not knowingly encourage anyone to go against their conscience. We also value the democratic process, messy as it often is. We encourage individuals to share according to their conscience, we listen carefully to minority positions on every issue, then we vote to decide upon the operations of our congregations. We also encourage the use of the democratic process throughout society, working to insure minority voices are heard but acting upon the will of the majority.

Our sixth principle affirms world community as a valued goal, along with peace, liberty and justice for all. We value a peaceful, free, and just world community. These values are global, encouraging many of us to support the work of the United Nations in the hope that all people would come together. This principle works against the nationalisms that were so destructive throughout the 20th century. It also works against the differences in wealth, class, race, gender, ability, and educational levels that have so often divided nations. Again, the idea of liberty has been sometimes practiced as an amoral freedom with regard to others, but this always has been and should be tempered by our respect for others, our recognition of the worth and dignity of each person. My right to liberty ends when it brings harm or enslaves another. This idea of world community can only work when all people are peaceable and free!

Our seventh principle calls us to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We value and respect all that is, no exceptions, including ourselves, and we recognize that all things and beings are connected. This principle is the most universal of all the principles and in some ways all the values within the other principles are included in this one, though it is also important to spell out the matters included in all the principles. This seventh principle goes even beyond

our terra-centrism to include the whole universe. We are connected to whatever aliens, whatever life forms may be out there. And whatever is out there is worthy of our respect, our recognition, our understanding.

These are our principles, and they comprise an almost all-encompassing statement of our values. These are the things that matter, and few of us shall ever succeed in living completely by these values. In many ways they challenge us far more than the creeds of any other religious tradition, for we are not offered divine help in living by these principles. Those who believe in a divine being may find some assistance in living these principles, but the values that they espouse are the highest human values and they call for us humans to affirm them and seek to live by them. Unitarian Universalism has no creed, no statement of what we all should believe about God, rather we have our statement of values, the Principles, and our Statement of Sources, our statement of the Living Tradition from which we gain wisdom such as that which informed our statement of Principles. It is from our many sources that we find teachings in religion and philosophy that shape our understanding of ourselves, our society, and our world so that we can do our best to live according to the UU Principles.

We do not talk much of sin in Unitarian Universalism, nor do we say enough about forgiveness. Sin for UUs would be in our failure to live according to the highest humanitarian values of our UU Principles. Lists of sins are not particularly helpful when you have such high standards as our principles. If we regularly think about our principles we know when we fail to meet the high standards they express. Forgiveness for UUs might be found in acts of restorative justice in individual and community relationships, but even more it is found in the effort to do better now and in the future than I have done before. Often the most difficult forgiveness to achieve is that of forgiving ourselves. Always the challenge of our principles is in striving to better meet their standards.

When I discovered Unitarian Universalism, it was in large part the Principles that convinced me that I was in the right place. I learned as a

United Methodist to do the best I can in relationships with others, to work to fix what injustices I could, and to believe that a better world was possible. The problem I had in that tradition was believing in a loving God that would allow so much injustice, so many wars, so much evil in the world. I found I could not believe that such a God was active, answered prayers, or even really cared much about humanity. For many years, I have been largely agnostic about God, believing that some kind of Deistic creator could have been involved at some point but seeing no particularly convincing evidence of ongoing activity by a deity beyond the interconnected web and life force that connects us all. Throughout my life, I have regularly seen people reach out to care for others, and I continue to believe in the core goodness of people. Yes, I have also seen evil acts and failures to live by the best values. Nonetheless, I continue to believe that we can live by standards as high as those of the UU Principles, and that we ought to keep trying to live by those standards!

I do believe that the principles and values we choose to live by can make a tremendous difference to us as individuals and to our society. This current political season has given us ample examples of narcissistic and possibly sociopathic principles being used as the personal standard of one candidate. In this Olympic season, we have also seen the success of teamwork and the fellowship and support that comes from living by a higher set of principles. Though I may often fail to reach the highest standards of our principles, I know that I will continue to choose them as a standard worthy of my life and work!

We really don't mention the Principles nearly often enough! They could be one of our best recruiting tools to the unchurched or those fed up with other religious traditions. Because they express the highest human values, without creedal reference to any divine being, while still being open to the possibility of divine beings, they can be accepted by just about any person of good will. I really like the Principles, though I can foresee that they may be better expressed in some future form for coming generations.

The words and ideas expressed in a Unitarian Universalist sermon are never the final words on any topic. They are always an invitation to dialogue and discussion. As such, I invite you to share your thoughts now or later about the sermon and the UU Principles! Amen!

Unitarian Universalist Association Principles and Purposes

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.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

The Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.