

Love is the Enduring Force That Holds Us Together
Beacon UU Congregation
January 29, 2022
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Perhaps you've noticed, as I have, that we are a culture that likes to play favorites. We have our favorite ice cream flavors, favorite sports teams, and favorite toothpaste. We can often name our favorite beach or movie star or pizza joint. Recently, I was asked which of the seven UU Principles is my "favorite," and I almost took the bait.

I was about to declare Principle #4 (the free and responsible search for truth and meaning) my "top pick," when I caught myself. Lucky #4 may be the Principle I believe most distinguishes us as a religion, but my "favorite?" Upon deeper reflection, it struck me that the established seven UU Principles (and the 8th one we recently adopted) are not meant to serve as a menu of possibilities or a list to rank or choose from. Nor, are they meant to approximate a bona fide "creed" to "believe" in.

However, "when we view the Principles as an integrated whole (as we might view a poem), a remarkable thematic symmetry and resonance emerges." (Lex Crane) Today, we'll look at the *whole* of the Principles and how they are evolving in our modern world, and how these seven foundational rocks were mined, tumbled, polished, and deposited into our religious jar.

It's worth noting and understanding that our seven UU Principles possess some deep roots, despite having been approved in their current form as recently as 1985. If we return to the rock metaphor, the principles have been mined from sources as diverse as earth-centered tradition to reformation ideals to post-modern, feminist sensibilities and liberation theology.

Here's a thumbnail overview of their evolution. As the Rev. Edward Frost explains in the introduction to his book, "With Purpose and Principle," our Unitarian and Universalist forebears knew well enough that a religion needs to be able to tell the world what its adherents value. The difficulty for these free, liberal churches lay in formulating a declaration without usurping the freedom of belief and thought cherished and firmly defended by its members. In 1803, the Universalists adopted the Winchester Confession, an anti-Calvinist statement of belief that affirmed the central doctrine of the new American religion -- that in God's love and forbearance, all souls will be saved.

A liberty clause was added to enable congregations to adopt their own statement of belief "provided they didn't reject the general profession." In 1899 and again in 1935, the Universalists adopted new professions of faith framed in more contemporary language. So, in effect, we have always been an evolving faith. And, so it goes.

The Unitarians, on the other hand, never fashioned a creed or even a profession of faith. Their religion had been based on a rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and focused on the teaching and example of the human Jesus. The heady Unitarian set developed moral philosophies, notably at Harvard, based on virtues such as conscience and reason. They were the head to the Universalist's heart. During era after era of controversy, Unitarians made a series of evolving theological statements, first in 1825, then again in 1894, and finally after World War II.

Not surprisingly, as the merger of the two religions was under construction in 1961, men (and yes, it was all men) found themselves enmeshed in a delicate and tricky process of concocting an acceptable list of six Principles. In the end, the compromise list reflected the era, with much patriarchal and limited language such as: "Love to God and love to man;" "the dignity of man and the ideals of brotherhood." and a reference to "our Judeo-Christian heritage." But nothing especially inter-relational or warm. No "love" language.

A decade later, amidst an upsurge of feminist sensibilities, the UU Women's Federation raised the issue of revision; and after another 10 years of fine study and dialogue, a non-sexist version of the Principles, drafted by various women's groups was presented to our General Assembly in 1981. It didn't pass, yet this effort spurred the creation and empowerment of a mixed gender committee to study and update the Principles. Finally, after much careful tinkering (UU-style), the current configuration of seven Principles was approved by resolution at GA in 1985 to what one committee member recalls as "loud applause, sighs of relief, tears, and a few shrugs of 'wait and see.'"

The Rev. Walter Royal Jones, one esteemed member of the committee, considers most significant the switch from "the free and disciplined search for truth" in the 1961 statement to the current "free and responsible search," suggesting the search takes place in community. Jones reflects that "apart from the Quakers and their time-honored preference for consensus, it is unlikely that the history of American religion provides any comparable example of such intentional and committed use of inclusive, non-hierarchical processes to produce a guiding statement."

I reckon that even if you're brand spanking new to the congregation, you can catch on to the seven Principles pretty quickly. And if you stick around awhile, you'll discover that the UU principles are ubiquitous to our religious life. They appear in the front of the hymnal, they are often posted on church walls, and even recited in unison as a weekly affirmation in some congregations.

The Principles have guided our denomination's work in social justice and shaped the development of our religious exploration programs. Even Beacon Press, the UU

publishing house, has required its editors to include with every proposal a statement explaining how the prospective volume would support one or more of our Principles.

Yet, even with what appears to be consensus about the primacy of the Principles in our self-identity, these seven seemingly simple statements of affirmation stir up dissent. On one hand, they are besmirched as “bumper sticker theology” – too broad, prosaic, and general to represent the depth of who we are and what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

And at other end of the scale, they are derided as overly creedal, even “subversive.” My colleague Richard Gilbert recalls a witty ditty written by a member of his *Building Your Own Theology* class, who set this dilemma to a popular show tune:

“Got no dogma, got no creed;
These are the things that you don’t need.
Meeting Sunday, please do come,
Join us round our vac-u-um.”

“Sometimes we so amuse ourselves by this self-inflicted humor,” writes Gilbert, that we don’t comprehend the seriousness of its implications. In the absence of a creed, are we UUs all process and no substance? If we cannot have a faith based on creed, dogma, or ecclesiastical authority, on what can we base it? Ourselves?” Spiritual navel-gazing can surely lead to toxic individualism or befuddlement, or both.

Upon entering our UU communities, we’ve voluntarily thrown off the cloak of rigid creeds, and despite the initial sensation of joyful release, we may come to feel like a carpenter without a toolbox. How does one pound a nail with a phantom hammer,” we might wonder.

For better or worse, the UU principles do not approximate a capital C “Creed.” We’ll do without; thank you very much and Amen. Yet, according to the Rev. Lex Crane, the *integrated whole* of our principles does provide a bedrock of shared reality assumptions and religious underpinnings for most Unitarian Universalists. These are: promoting the creative cultural evolution of humanity; acknowledging our place in an interdependent web; humbly accepting that there are mysteries beyond our grasp, A faith in the power and potential of humanity, A commitment to the search for truth and meaning leading to transformation, and a comprehensive love: caring about the quality of life of all beings.

In sum, the principles carry the essential spirit, rather than the letter, of religious ideals. I like Crane’s thinking, but that list is darn intellectual and a whooper of a mouthful! It reflects the braininess we’ve carried throughout our history. It mentions a comprehensive love, but is that enough heart for us in 2023?

Even without doctrine, it's ok for us UUs to have a strong faith, balancing thought and feeling, and stand firmly within it. Heinrich Heine, the German poet, was gazing with a friend at an old cathedral. The friend asked, "Tell me Heinrich, why can't people build piles like that anymore?" The poet replied, " My dear friend, in those days, people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral." Now, more than 60 years after the adoption of those seven familiar Principles, we are in the process of another growth spurt in our uncommon denomination and we are examining our convictions, our values, our heart-centered, bone-deep covenant with one another, society and the planet.

I mentioned earlier that there were as "loud applause, sighs of relief, tears, and a few shrugs of 'wait and see'" when the current Principles (with the 7th added) were adopted in 1961. There have been some similar reactions to the effort to revamp those Principles. In truth, they should have been reviewed much sooner than they have been, according to the UUA bylaws, but that is happening now and with careful attention. A Commission has been empowered to draft what is called Article II, a recasting of our familiar Principles as Values and Covenants, with further statements regarding Inspirations (what had been our Sources), Inclusion and Freedom of Belief.

The prominent section outlining Values and Covenants begins with the statement: "Love is the Enduring Force That Holds Us Together." A simple, lovely, heart-centered utterly new preamble. I like it. It goes on to say: "As Unitarian Universalists in religious community, we covenant, congregation to congregation and through our association, to support and assist each other in engaging our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom and reason, hope and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love inspires and powers the passion with which we embody our values.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are (and there are seven of them – coincidence? I couldn't say): Love, Justice, Generosity, Evolution, Pluralism, Equity, Interdependence. Each section includes the words "we covenant to" rather than "we affirm and promote" – a language shift which preferences who we are in community, rather than who we are individually. The wording from the 8th principle about a commitment to dismantling oppression and racism is included in the section on Justice. Active spiritual and holistic words such as gratitude, hope, compassion, transform, celebrate, learn, humility, care, respect, repair, embrace, solidarity and Beloved Community appear in the draft that is currently available. (see addenda after the sermon for the full text)

This drafting and review process has definitely pushed some buttons because it will nudge us out of our comfort zones, if we let it. The principles are comfortable. Adding the 8th principle created some important grit and friction, and now this revamp is also disrupting the status quo.

I don't exaggerate when I tell you that people have left UUism over the 8th principle. Of course, we've had people leave our congregations over the sale of property and the paint color on walls. Or, because the minister didn't defer to their theological language. People have left over OWL and being asked to pledge. And people will leave over Article 2, as well. Side note: There is even a burgeoning protest group called "Save our Principles." As I've said before, "nobody likes change but a wet baby." Yet, embracing change is the sign of a mature faith, an evolving faith.

You may wonder if I'm asking you to just swallow whatever the UUA wants to feed you? No, I would not do that. I am fiercely vigilant about creeping illiberalism in our denomination and whether we are being pressured to speak the language of the movement at all times. And to their credit, the Article II commission has held numerous, open feedback sessions to gather reactions and suggestions about this new format. And just this past week, I received an email with the header: "We heard you."

Apparently, many folks want to "see" where our beloved and familiar Principles connect to each of the new section of the document. I appreciate that. It reassures me that we are not bending too far into a creed. And yet, ironically, the word creed itself is from the word credo, which is not about thoughts or opinions, but rather, what we are willing to give our hearts to. It is about love...the enduring force that holds us together. Imagine that?

There's an old joke among UUs that suggests that God is optional in the New England meetinghouse; church is optional in the Midwestern fellowship; and clothes are optional west of the Rockies. True or false, the one thing that shouldn't be optional, east or west, high church or low, is a commitment to evolve and to covenant together as a Beloved Community. When we accept the call to Unitarian Universalism, we enter into that covenant with one another and with our Principles and Values. We affirm, we promote, we live by convictions rather than opinions in cathedrals or temples or roadside shrines of our own making. We agree to care for and repair the planet, and to preserve the delicate but essential balance between individualism and interdependence.

So may it be for us, as we move and act and change and covenant, with eight small pebbles in our shoes reminding us of who we are and what we might become on this shared journey. May love be the enduring force that holds us together.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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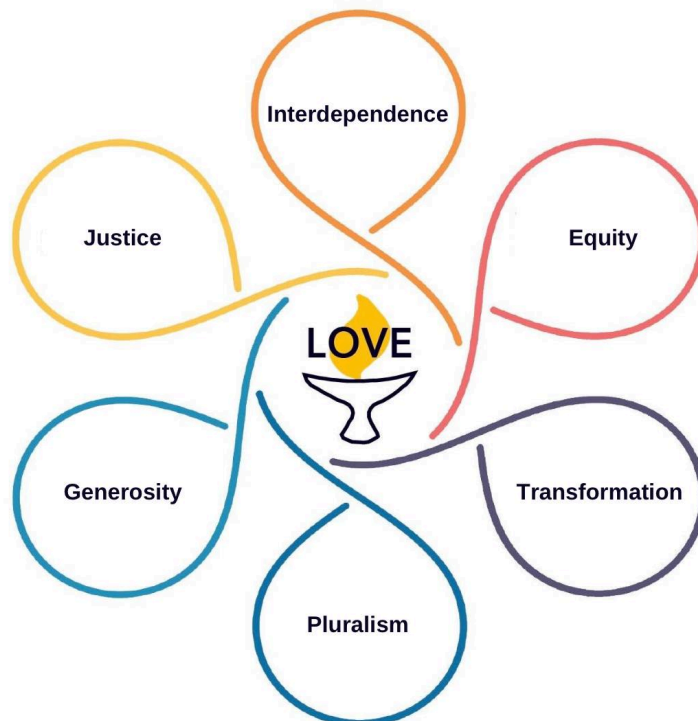
ARTICLE II:

Proposed Values and Covenant to be voted upon at 2023 General Assembly

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:



Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating

and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity. We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

As Unitarian Universalists, we use, and are inspired by, sacred and secular understandings that help us to live into our values. We respect the histories, contexts and cultures in which they were

created and are currently practiced. These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. Grateful for the religious ancestries we inherit and the diversity which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.