

**An Invitation to Explore the Seven Unitarian
Universalist Principles**

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Introduction

The following material is related to a series of services, conducted in the summer and fall of 2022, for the congregation of the Mountain Light Unitarian, Universalist Church in Ellijay, GA. The program was adapted from a book With Purpose and Principle: Essays About the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism edited by Edward A. Frost. It should be noted that the essays represent the opinion of the essayists, not the official position of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). It is not necessary to have read the book in order to make use of the materials.

The material is divided into several sections. The **first section** is this brief introduction that you are reading. The **second section** is a brief history of how the Seven Principles came be adopted by the UUA. The **third section** is a set of questions on each of the principles with space for you to write down your own thoughts about how the question might be answered. If you need more space just continue your comments on the back of the page. Since the UUA has no doctrine, there are no prescribed or official positions on any of the principles or what they must say to you. It is not necessary to have read anything about the Seven Principles before answering the questions. The purpose here is to draw out what **you** think not what you know about what someone else thinks. The **fourth section** contains the same set of questions found in section three with answers provided by me as an illustration of what an answer to each question might look like. It is strongly recommended that you complete your own answers to the questions before reading the sample answers in section four so that your thoughts about the questions won't be influence by the sample answers. You are free to agree or disagree with any part of or the entirety of any answer. The **fifth and final section** is an essay written by me that addresses what I took from the experience of preparing the materials and facilitating the discussions for this series of services.

A Brief History of the Unitarian Universalist Principles

A Unitarian Universalist Creed?

A common critique leveled at UU-ism is that it has no creed. It is true that UU congregations, as independent organizations, have historically been somewhat fearful of the notion of a creed while recognizing that a religion must be able to assert to what its members adhere.

Throughout the 19th century there was much debate within Unitarianism and Universalism about what the two institutions stood for, with much of the debate being between theists and humanists. Several attempts were made to find common ground between these two factions.

The current seven principles began to come into focus during and following WWII. A committee was established by the American Unitarian Association chaired by Rev. A. Powell Davies. This committee developed the following five principles:

1. Individual freedom of belief,
2. Discipleship to advancing truth,
3. The democratic process in human relations,
4. Universal brotherhood undivided by nation, race or creed,
5. Allegiance to the cause of a united world community.

Universal acceptance of this statement of creed, however, was not forthcoming. The reasons for this are usually said to be twofold. First, the view that minority positions and thus their proponents were excluded. Second, the view that there was an unwavering adherence to the ideology of individualism.

Concerns were also raised about the theological language used at the time of the Unitarian and Universalist merger in 1961 and the absence of any focus on ecological concerns.

Little was actually accomplished, though there were some gender wording changes during the 1960s and 70s, because UUA feminists

argued that the The Purpose and Principles wording was still patriarchal and hierarchical.

Lucile Schuck Longview and other UUA feminists drafted a resolution that proposed to initiate a search within UUA for the religious roots of sexism that was adopted by the 1977 General Assembly. This resolution is generally recognized as providing the original impetus for revising the UUA Principles and Purposes (hereafter, P&P).

As proposals for revision moved forward, one proposed amendment was for the elimination of the word “God” from the P&P. The Rev. Carl Scovel, a prominent Boston UUA minister, argued that the UUA was pluralistic and there were three strands within the UUA: theist, humanist and Christian that must be recognized. Opposition to the amendment also arose from the UU Women’s Federation. There was considerable conflict around the proposed amendments that ultimately resulted in a vote by the General Assembly to refer the proposed amendments to a committee for study and preparation of a report to be presented to the 1982 General Assembly.

The committee distributed questionnaires to all UUA congregations and then spent months in meetings and telephone conferences discussing the responses. Finally, a model amendment to the P&P was presented to the 1983 General Assembly. The committee said that it found the pluralism of the UUA made it very difficult to find wording that would satisfy all the factions within the UUA. The committee stated that it opted to frame its model amendment based less on religious belief and more on ethical principles. The model presented contained seven principles that UUA congregations were to affirm and promote.

Before the model amendment was presented for final approval at the 1984 General Assembly, the committee separated the amendment into two sections: Principles and Sources. The latter represented the “living tradition” shared by the membership and included a diversity of religious, spiritual and humanist sources. The committee also rearranged

the order of the principles to reflect but not eliminate a shift away from the individual and a greater focus on community, earth and universe.

The proposal to amend the bylaws with a new P&P section was presented at the 1984 General Assembly. A number of amendments were proposed from the floor, and three were adopted.

1. The word “liberty” was added to the sixth principle to read, “...with peace, liberty and justice for all.”
2. The seventh principle was amended and replaced the wording “...respect for earth and interdependence of its living systems.” with “...respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”
3. The Sources section was amended to add “...wisdom from the world’s religions”.

Eleven years later, a final amendment to the Sources section was proposed by the Covenant of UUA Pagans, which passed with considerable controversy and debate. The wording added was “...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.” Following its passage, a Crow Indian delegate, in full native dress, rose and stated that the General Assembly had voted to include his heritage.

The Seven Principles with Questions

I. Principle One: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person

Quote from Essayist Marilyn Sewell: *“As liberal religious people, the fruits of the spirit must be made manifest in our commitment to justice. We are sometimes better at articulating our commitment than actually carrying out any action. We think because we’ve said it we’ve done it...Again, we must monitor our actions to see that they fit our words. Should there not be a fit, our words will ring hollow.”* I would add, that mere verbal espousal of a value is not in itself a guarantee that one will act from that value.

It has been observed that some Unitarian Universalists reject Christians, persons from other faith traditions - such as Moslems, the politically conservative and persons who have been convicted of criminal acts. Is this justified? Why or why not?

Principle One is sometimes referred to as arising from a tradition of “radical respect.” Does radical respect require that we accept all behavior on equal footing? Why or why not?

Many UUs support abortion rights and the death penalty. How do you reconcile this support with the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

The roots of Unitarian Universalism are in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In an 1819 sermon, Unitarian minister William Channing laid out four major points of difference between traditional Christianity and Unitarian Christianity: *1) the Bible is open to question and criticism, 2) the concept of the Trinity is invalid, 3) Jesus was a human being and 4) God is infinitely good and not a God of wrath.*

Has the UUA strayed too far from its roots and does liberal Christianity have a role to play in today's UU churches? Why or why not?

Closing quote: Dr. Norbert Capek in his prayer at the first flower communion in his church in Czechoslovakia in 1923 said,

"Let us renew our resolution sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar, which estranges...In this holy resolution may we be strengthened knowing that we are God's family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us..."

Dr. Capek was an ardent critic of the Nazis and died in medical experiments conducted at Dachau.

II. Principle Two: Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations

A Catholic historian wrote of the Polish Unitarian church that, “...one reason why its adherents did not become more numerous was that its moral demands were too strict.”

A UU minister (Harry Meserve) once asked, “If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, speaking about Unitarians, said, “...what you are thunders so that I cannot hear what you say.”

It is said that compassion is the value that underlies Unitarian Universalist ethics. How might ethics (rules for behavior) be derived from compassion (often thought of as an emotional or feeling state)?

Willam Schultz, former UUA President, wrote that “...spirituality is the inspiration for all politics, which redeem.” What do you think he meant by that statement?

Essayist Richard Gilbert says it is fairly easy to see how to treat people equitably in most areas of diversity. However, he thinks determining equitable treatment is much more difficult when it comes to the economic sphere? What do you think equity might mean in the economic sphere?

Rev. Gilbert asserts that Justice is aimed at social problems. Do you agree that Justice is limited to social problems or do you see Justice as a broader concept that may include social problems but is not limited to them?

Rev. Gilbert also asserts that Justice cannot be arrived at by democratic methods nor by market forces. So, my question is, how then should Justice be achieved and who shall be the arbiter of what is just and what is unjust?

Rev. Gilbert suggests that the ideal of a Beloved Community is the source of a long UU tradition of building a heaven on earth. Do you agree that UUs have a tradition of building a heaven on earth and if so how might it best be achieved?

Rev. Gilbert suggests that another concept arising from the ideal of a Beloved Community is the “prophetic imperative.” The prophetic imperative for him is a belief that there are values that are not optional and that must be lived. He brings his essay to a close with two questions, which I presume are related to those values: What should we do? and Why should we do it?

III. Principle Three: Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement of Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations.

1. Acceptance of one another

Quote from essayist *Carolyn Owen-Towle* :

“Living in a pluralistic society, we cannot help but pay daily attention to just what is meant by acceptance. It is within our capability to accept someone for their intrinsic worth without necessarily accepting what they believe or how they act... One of the best ways to begin is within an accepting religious community...The most difficult, yet first task is to accept ourselves.”

Be introspective and carefully observe your subjective or visceral response to each of the following scenarios. We have a visitor at ML on potluck Sunday:

a. **First Scenario:** The visitor sits down next to you at the table where you are eating. He is poorly dressed and has a MAGA baseball cap on his head. is in need of a shave, has tobacco stains down the front of his shirt, is wearing shoes without laces and reeks of body odor. Your visceral reaction to the visitor?

b. **Second Scenario:** The visitor is sitting across from you. She is an attractive young woman who says that she grew up in a fundamentalist household, which she fled following high school. She worked for two years in a factory doing a repetitive assembly job. She quit that job and became a sex worker: first on streaming video and later as an escort. She indicates that she thinks that she is making a positive contribution to society. Your visceral reaction to the visitor?

How would you characterize the difference between tolerance and acceptance?

Why do you think some people struggle with acceptance?

How can we promote a climate of acceptance within our UU congregation?

Quote on acceptance: This is from a book written by a former journalist who spent several years living on the streets as a homeless woman, for reason I won't go into. Of the help she received that helped her resume a productive life she said:

“To those who helped me, I will always be eternally grateful...However, while you stand in your place in the accepted social hierarchy of giving and receiving, looking down on those you deem worthy of helping, would you please stop to notice how you are slapping us in the face with the very hand that you have extended in your goodwill?”

2. Encouragement to spiritual growth

Quote from essayist Carolyn Owen-Towle on Spirituality:

“Spiritual development takes effort. Every time we come from a personal place (a

place of Presence) rather than an intellectual place we express ourselves spiritually...If acceptance affirms us as we are, encouragement pushes us toward whom we might become.”

The transpersonal psychologist Charles Tart has this to say about spiritual paths “... many...spiritual paths say it’s not enough to just think about and believe or disbelieve their ideas—you can and should live your life so that you can have direct personal experience of the spiritual.

Some say that a human being is composed of three domains: body, mind and spirit and that our ultimate goal is to grow spiritually: What does the word spiritual mean to you?

Our welcoming statement asserts, “Ours is a socially liberal religion that encourages its members to seek their own spiritual path...”What is the nature of your spiritual path?

Where do you want your spiritual path to take you?

How does your spiritual path help you with accepting the intrinsic worth of others regardless of their beliefs, appearance or behavior?

How might MLUUC encourage members who are or might want to explore the spiritual dimension to their lives?

IV. Principle Four: A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

The essayist Fredric Muir says that he has talked with hundreds if not thousands of congregants about their motivation for joining a UU church. So, before looking at what he learned, let's begin by asking this question of ourselves.

1. What led you to seek out and join a UU church?

In a nutshell, what Muir learned was that the majority of people said that they were *seeking values* that would provide a meaningful framework in which to live purposeful lives.

The spiritual teacher Fr. Richard Rohr offered this observation about why people are drawn to a spiritual life:

“The vagaries and disappointments of life's journey eventually make you long for some overall direction, purpose, or goal beyond getting through another day.”

What does the phrase “seeking values” in Muir’s comment mean to you? *Is it an internal or an external search? Is one type of search more spiritual than the other?*

What is the difference between values and a meaningful framework of values?

The use of the word “truth” can be applied to contextual truth as well as to universal Truth, usually distinguished by a lower case or upper case “tee.”

Are the UU principles true or True? How do you know?

Has your experience revealed any “truth” of either type? If so, give an example.

Principle IV also refers to meaning. While not explicit in the principle, I would say that to speak about meaning it is helpful to consider objective meaning and subjective meaning.

a. The first type is objective such as, cutting down a tree in your yard because it is dead and rotting. The activity has meaning because it will help ensure your house is not damaged. This is dependent on context.

b. The second type is subjective, such as, having a meditation practice to expand your awareness. This activity has meaning because you value personal growth and development. This is not dependent on context. The second type can have a philosophical or a religious foundation.

Do you engage in subjective activity that you find meaningful? What is its purpose or goal?

**Does your meaning have to be accepted by others as either truth or Truth?
Why or why not?**

**What would you say is the most common way in which subjective truths are
conveyed to others?**

V. Principle Five: Freedom of Conscience and Democratic Process within Our Congregations and Society at Large

Quote from essayist Earl K. Holt III,

“What is unique and precious to Unitarian Universalism is that we affirm no external authority in our religious lives, not of church or creed or Bible, but hold as authoritative only the internal voice of conscience that speaks in every human soul.

What does conscience mean to you?

How might Freedom of Conscience be related to encouraging members of UU congregations to seek their own spiritual path?

The U.S. is one country that exempts from participation in a war on the basis of conscientious objection. Legally this is limited to individuals who are practicing members of a recognized religion that teaches non-violence or pacifism as a doctrine.

Could a UU qualify for this exemption? Explain.

What does the word “democracy” mean to you?

Why does the UUA, a religious organization, promote a political process - democracy?

Why are freedom of conscience and democratic processes linked in Principle Five?

Closing Quote from the late Rev. Paul H. Beattie:

“The survival of our religious movement or any like it will always be in doubt, not from without but [from] within, for in each age large numbers of people will be anxious and ready to abandon this approach to religion for something which seem to promise greater certainty, greater assurance. We have to learn and relearn in each generation how wonderful it is to say to each person who comes to us: in religion -- in life -- you must learn to think for yourself and act for yourself -- no one can or should do it for you.”

VI. Principle Six: The Goal of World Community with Peace, Liberty and Justice for All

Quote from Henry Commager's *A Declaration of Interdependence* cited by the essay author, John Buehrens:

“When in the course of history the threat of extinction confronts humankind, it is necessary for the people of this nation to declare their interdependence with the people of all nations and to embrace those principles and build those institutions which will enable us to survive and civilization to flourish...all the peoples and nations of the globe should acknowledge their interdependence and acknowledge that the forces that unite us are incomparably deeper than those that divide us -- that all people are part of one global community, dependent upon one body of resources, bound together by the ties of a common humanity and associated in a common adventure on the planet Earth.

What do you think is the most critical ingredient required for a true world community?

In the opening quote there was a reference to “the forces that unite us.” What might those forces be and why are they uniting forces?

In the opening quote there was a reference to “dependence on one body of resources.” What are these resources and how can they be sustained and equably shared?

Principle Six posits that a world community should engender “peace, liberty and justice for all.” This clearly takes us into the realm of politics and governance. What form would governance of a world community have to take in order to make these concepts concrete realities in practice?

Finally, why do you think the UU adopted Principle Six as one of its seven guiding principles?

To close, I will offer a short quote from the document “Toward a Global Ethic” produced by the Parliament of World Religions and endorsed by the UUA, which is a member organization:

“A better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws alone... Both the hearts and minds of women and men must be addressed...Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed also.”

VII. Principle Seven: Respect for the Independent Web of Existence of which We are a Part

Barbara Merritt, the essay's author, explains that the independent web of life is not just a poetic metaphor. It is a fact of our existence. It is an essential way of understanding the world that we live in. It is evident in the phenomenon of entanglement, brought to us by quantum physics, that ties together every particle in the universe. It is evident from the findings in biology that has made us aware of the ecological system that blankets the planet.

We are told by some philosophers that our very identity as individuals derives from relationship and connection. The web of life is foundational to relationship and connection.

Unitarian Universalists place a strong emphasis on independence and freedom. In what ways might this be an aid or a hindrance when it comes to participating in the web of life?

Unitarian Universalist committed to Principle Seven conscientiously act to repair, restore and promote the web of life. As an individual, how can such a commitment be expressed in your daily life?

What are some ways in which we can tell by observing others if they are committed to supporting the web of life?

A short quote from the essay:

The Unitarian novelist, Herman Melville, wrote:

“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us...and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects. On a daily basis, we affect the web of all existence, just as we are affected by it.”

The Seven Principles with Questions and Sample Answers

I. Principle One: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person

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It has been observed that some Unitarian, Universalists reject Christians, persons from other faith traditions - such as Moslems, the politically conservative and persons who have been convicted of criminal acts. Is this justified? Why or why not?

No. You cannot recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person on a selective basis. When making such a rejection, one is judging the other person and objectifying them as a symbol of a negative belief that you yourself hold. You are using this benchmark belief as a way of elevating yourself above another.

Principle One is sometimes referred to as arising from a tradition of “radical respect.” Does radical respect require that we accept all behavior on equal footing? Why or why not?

No. We should not accept behavior that is detrimental to and a threat to the well being of the church or the larger community. Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of an individual is independent of that individual’s behavior. You can respect the person while rejecting their threatening or dangerous behavior.

Many UUs support abortion rights and the death penalty. How do you reconcile this support with the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Personally, I think the abortion issue is a balance between the mother and the fetus. Until such time as the fetus can be viable outside the womb, it has a “parasitic relationship” with the mother. The mother’s sovereignty over her own body should take precedence up until this time. Once the fetus reaches a point of likely viability, it deserves recognition as an individual human being. The mother’s sovereignty over her body is temporarily compromised out of respect for the sovereignty of the baby.

As for the death penalty, I don't think there is any justification for it. It is simply an act of retaliation on the part of the state that declares the inherent worth and dignity of every individual null and void. One must always bear in mind that termination of life is not reversible and criminal convictions are reversible and do happen. Society can be protected from potentially dangerous behavior without employing the death penalty.

The roots of Unitarian, Universalism are in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In an 1819 sermon, Unitarian minister William Channing laid out four major points of difference between traditional Christianity and Unitarian Christianity: *1) the Bible is open to question and criticism, 2) the concept of the Trinity is invalid, 3) Jesus was a human being and 4) God is infinitely good and not a God of wrath.*

Has UU strayed too far from its roots and does liberal Christianity have a role to play in today's UU churches? Why or why not?

Personally, I would say yes Unitarian Christianity could play a role in today's UU congregations. I would suggest that Jesus along with other spiritual teachers, past and present, could be brought into UU services as exemplars of the UU guiding principles.

Closing quote: Dr. Norbert Capek in his prayer at the first flower communion in his church in Czechoslovakia in 1923 said, " Let us renew our resolution sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar, which estranges...In this holy resolution may we be strengthened knowing that we are God's family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us..." Dr. Capek was an ardent critic of the Nazis and died in medical experiments conducted at Dachau.

II. Principle Two: Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations

A Catholic historian wrote of the Polish Unitarian church that, “...one reason why its adherents did not become more numerous was that its moral demands were too strict.”

A UU minister (Harry Meserve) once asked, “If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, speaking about Unitarians, said, “...what you are thunders so that I cannot hear what you say.”

It is said that compassion is the value that underlies Unitarian Universalist ethics. How might ethics (rules for behavior) be derived from compassion (often thought of as an emotional or feeling state)?

It is possible working from a consensus about situations that elicit compassion in a group for that group to derive some rules about right behavior. I would suggest, however, that following a list of rules for right behavior is no longer evidence of compassion but of rule-governed behavior. In my opinion compassion flows from the heart and ethics flows from the intellect. There are ways they can work together but one should not be mistaken for the other.

Willam Schultz, former UUA President, wrote that spirituality is the inspiration for all politics, which redeem. What do you think he meant by that statement?

My understanding of the word “spiritual” is that it is experience as opposed to belief based. Further, that it alludes to a particular type of experience that leads to an “enlightened” understanding of human beings, their true nature and their needs. Thus, a politics based on spirituality would be people centered and supportive of all their needs, which certainly includes the early stages in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, such as sustenance, safety, security and acceptance or belonging.

Essayist Richard Gilbert says it is fairly easy to see how to treat people equitably in most areas of diversity. However, he thinks determining equitable treatment is much more difficult when it comes to the economic sphere? What do you think equity might mean in the economic sphere?

In principle, I would say that an income floor should be established that is adequate

to meet basic needs such as sustenance, shelter, clothing and health care. When someone earns less than the minimum to adequately cover these needs the difference would be covered by society. If they are unemployed the full income floor should be provided by society. However, this entails some potential problems. One is that employers may deliberately underpay workers knowing that the gap will be filled at no cost to themselves. The other is the potential impact such a program might have on the motivation to be productive and contribute to society. In other words, the free rider problem.

Rev. Gilbert asserts that Justice is aimed at social problems. Do you agree that Justice is limited to social problems or do you see Justice as a broader concept that may include social problems but is not limited to them?

Personally, I think Justice is an inclusive concept that seeks outcomes for all people and in all circumstances that is consonant with their needs as human beings and to insure they receive the treatment they deserve. Certainly, there are many marginalized people in our country and beyond who deserve more just treatment. However, I don't see marginalization as a prerequisite for Justice.

Rev. Gilbert also asserts that Justice cannot be arrived at by democratic methods nor by market forces. So, my question is, how then should Justice be achieved and who shall be the arbiter of what is just and what is unjust?

Personally, at least in the U.S., I see no viable alternative to working within the democratic framework established for the U.S. government. This includes both the constitutional restraints on government and the constitutionally guaranteed rights of individuals. Further, market forces always have and probably always will set limits on what is possible.

We like to think we are so rich that there are no limits but we delude ourselves because our government and its citizens are burdened down with debt from a lack of willingness to prioritize and manage our resources responsibly. A character flaw that could result in a catastrophe at almost anytime.

I have no problem with an individual or a group of individuals from deciding what is Just and pursuing that vision by acceptable and appropriate means. I clearly do have a problem with the idea that what is needed is a Justice dictator, which seems to be implied in Rev. Gilbert's view.

Rev. Gilbert suggests that the ideal of a Beloved Community is the source of a long UU tradition of building a heaven on earth. Do you agree that UUs have a tradition of building a heaven on earth and if so how might it best be achieved?

Since I have only a sketchy knowledge of UU history and therefore of any traditions that are a part of it, I can't say whether or not UUs have traditionally acted toward such an end. In my view, the first thing that would need to be done on such a project would be to operationalize what heaven on earth means. You can't make good choices about methods until you know what specifically one is trying to accomplish. I also think that such an undertaking is better accomplished from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Thus, I think the first goal would be to be sure you've brought yourself into alignment with the goal before trying to move anyone else toward such alignment.

Rev. Gilbert suggests that another concept arising from the ideal of a Beloved Community is the "prophetic imperative." The prophetic imperative for him is a belief that there are values that are not optional and that must be lived. He brings his essay to a close with two questions, which I presume are related to those values: What should we do? and Why should we do it?

First, I think the questions are asked in a backward order. It seems to me that they are essentially about actions to take and motives for those actions. I think one should explore motives before deciding on actions. I again presume that the values that he alludes to are the very list of values inherent in what we are exploring; i.e., the seven UU Principles.

Second, I think each UU must decide for him or herself, which, if any, of the principles they embrace. Following making that decision, what actions, as an individual, he or she can take to be personally in alignment with the values accepted as guiding principles. After that, one can collaborate with others in promoting mutually agreed upon goals and outcomes, especially as they can be achieved locally where one has the ability to exercise the greatest influence.

III. Principle Three: Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement of Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations.

1. Acceptance of one another

Quote from essayist *Carolyn Owen-Towle* :

“Living in a pluralistic society, we cannot help but pay daily attention to just what is meant by acceptance. It is within our capability to accept someone for their intrinsic worth without necessarily accepting what they believe or how they act... One of the best ways to begin is within an accepting religious community...The most difficult, yet first task is to accept ourselves.” Carolyn Owen-Towle

Be introspective and carefully observe your subjective or visceral response to each of the following scenarios. We have a visitor at ML on potluck Sunday:

a. **First Scenario:** *This visitor is poorly dressed and has a MAGA baseball cap on his head. He is wearing shoes without laces, has tobacco stains down the front of his shirt and reeks of body odor. He sits down next to you at the table where you are eating. Your visceral reaction to the visitor?*

The visitor makes one feel a bit uncomfortable since he appears to align with a political philosophy that I question. On the other hand, I support his right to hold whatever political views he wishes. His apparent lack of good hygiene reminds me very much of someone I once knew and liked.

b. **Second Scenario:** *This visitor is an attractive young woman who in conversation with you during lunch reveals that she grew up in a fundamentalist household and fled from her home following completion of high school. She worked for two years at a highly repetitive assembly job in a factory, which she quit. She then became a sex worker: first on streaming video and later as an escort. She indicates that she thinks that her occupation as a sex worker is making a positive contribution to society. Your visceral reaction to the visitor?*

Being someone often described as a philosophical libertarian, I think that everyone should exercise sovereignty over their own body. Thus, I have not problem with her line of work other than it is illegal in most places. However, I don't think it should be illegal and hope she doesn't get ensnared by the judicial system. I understand why she fled from her early home environment and am sympathetic to her felt need to get away from it.

How would you characterize the difference between tolerance and acceptance?

Tolerance means that you while you may hold judgments about that person, you are willing to work with them or be around them in some social contexts. On the other hand, if you accept a person then you hold no judgments about them and openly interact with them without reservations.

Why do you think some people struggle with acceptance?

I think some people have a struggle accepting certain people because they hold negative judgments about the person or some aspect(s) of the person. In other words they are prejudiced (prejudgment). Until they are able to neutralize their prejudice against someone they will be unable to fully accept them.

How can we promote a climate of acceptance within our UU congregation?

I think by setting expectations and following them with a life lived as an example.

Quote on acceptance: This is from a book written by a former journalist who spent several years living on the streets as a homeless woman, for reason I won't go into. Of the help she received that helped her resume a productive life she said,

“To those who helped me, I will always be eternally grateful...However, while you stand in your place in the accepted social hierarchy of giving and receiving, looking down on those you deem worthy of helping, would you please stop to notice how you are slapping us in the face with the very hand that you have extended in your goodwill?”

2. Encouragement to spiritual growth

“Spiritual development takes effort. Every time we come from a personal place (a place of Presence) rather than an intellectual place we express ourselves spiritually...If acceptance affirms us as we are, encouragement pushes us toward whom we might become.” Carolyn Owen-Towle

The transpersonal psychologist Charles Tart has this to say about spiritual paths:

“... many...spiritual paths say it's not enough to just think about and believe or disbelieve their ideas—you can and should live your life so that you can have

direct personal experience of the spiritual.

Some say that a human being is composed of three domains: body, mind and spirit and that our ultimate goal is to grow spiritually: What does the word spiritual mean to you?

It refers to the personal experience of the noetic, the unexplainable and the uncommunicable. It is phenomenological. It embraces aspects of life that are beyond the bounds of mundane daily experience. It enlarges your perspective.

Our welcoming statement asserts, “Ours is a socially liberal religion that encourages its members to seek their own spiritual path...” What is the nature of your spiritual path?

I follow the pathless path, which arises from within and is unique to each person who sets a foot upon it. Most only arrive at the pathless path after following multiple paths to dead ends and then realizing that the source of what is sought can only be found with oneself. It need only to be recognized and experienced. To this end I employ contemplation and meditation.

** For a brief outline of how the philosopher Ken Wilber might answer this question, see the note at the end.*

Where do you want your spiritual path to take you?

To living in Presence, free of judgment but not without discernment.

How does your spiritual path help you with accepting the intrinsic worth of others regardless of their beliefs, appearance or behavior?

If one is fully Present with others and without judgment then you are free to see the intrinsic worth lying at the core of each of us.

In my view, at least in part, the reason people often have a problem with accepting the intrinsic worth of others is related to their metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality. Often these assumptions are so ingrained that they aren't even recognized. Most of us by default are monistic materialist (its matter all the way down) but there are alternatives that are more amenable to acceptance such as monistic idealism (its consciousness all the way down).

How might MLUUC encourage members who are or might want to explore the spiritual dimension to their lives?

Have presentations by congregants about their spiritual lives.

Have presenters from different traditional spiritual paths describe those paths.

Have an ongoing discussion group focused on spirituality and spiritual practices.

*** *Philosopher Ken Wilber might says a spiritual path should requires that you:***

*1. **Show up**, you have to commit to begin the process.*

*2. **Clean up**, you have to deal with your beliefs that lead to judging others and your self in negative ways. You have to deal with habitual behaviors that make you reactive rather than reflective. In other words, do what Carl Jung called doing shadow work. Dealing with everything that is lurking in the shadows of your consciousness that is getting in the way of point three below.*

*3. **Grow up**, you have to work at unfolding your developmental potential to realize all that is available to you. In a very simplified form work on broadening your point of view:*

- 1. Sensoricentric*
- 2. Egocentric*
- 3. Ethnocentric*
- 4. Sociocentric*
- 5. Worldcentric*

*4. **Wake up**, embrace Presence as your way of being in the world and learn to actually be Present with life as it presents itself to you.*

IV. Principle Four: A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

The essayist Fredric Muir says that he has talked with hundreds if not thousands of congregants about their motivation for joining a UU church. So, before looking at what he learned, let's begin by asking this question of ourselves.

1. What led you to seek out and join a UU church?

I was looking for a spiritual community.

In a nutshell, what Muir learned was that the majority of people said that they were *seeking values* that would provide a meaningful framework in which to live purposeful lives.

The spiritual teacher Fr. Richard Rohr offered this observation about why people are drawn to a spiritual life:

“The vagaries and disappointments of life's journey eventually make you long for some overall direction, purpose, or goal beyond getting through another day.”

What does the phrase “seeking values” in Muir’s comment mean to you? Is it an internal or an external search? Is one type of search more spiritual than the other?

An external search is an investigation of external sources of values that you accept, e.g., the Ten Commandments, the Eight Fold Path or the Seven Principles.

An internal search is an appraisal and evaluation of your experience in an effort to draw from it meaningful generalizations; e.g., personal values. Since spirit is usually thought of as an inherent property of the individual, I would suggest that only an internal search is truly spiritual, though it might be aided by an investigative process conducted externally.

What is the difference between values and a meaningful framework of values?

I would say that stand alone values are essentially **unintegrated**. A meaningful framework suggests to me that a set of stand alone values have been organized into an **integrated** whole that makes them more easily and generally applied to everyday life

The use of the word “truth” can be applied to contextual truth as well as to universal Truth, usually distinguished by a lower case or upper case “tee.”

Are the UU principles true or True? How do you know?

I would say that they are true in the contextual sense. Whether or not they are True at all times and in all places throughout the universe is impossible to say.

Has your experience revealed any “truth” of either type? If so, give an example.

truth: People often confuse their contextual truth with universal Truth.

Truth: Our experience is limited to what we are consciously aware of.

Principle IV also refers to meaning. While not explicit in the principle, I would say that to speak about meaning it is helpful to consider objective meaning and subjective meaning.

a. The first type is objective such as, cutting down a tree in your yard because it is dead and rotting. The activity has meaning because it will help ensure your house is not damaged. This is dependent on context.

b. The second type is subjective, such as, having a meditation practice to expand your awareness. This activity has meaning because you value personal growth and development. This is not dependent on context. The second type can have a philosophical or a religious foundation.

Do you engage in subjective activity that you find meaningful?

What is its purpose or goal?

My Noetic experiences imply to me that consciousness is primary. This led me to meditate on a regular basis to refine my awareness. The goal being to reduce ignorance in myself and thereby marginally in humanity.

Does your meaning have to be accepted by others as either truth or Truth? Why or why not?

I would say no. What is meaningful to me is my “truth” and is independent of anyone else’s acceptance or opinion.

What would you say is the most common way in which subjective truths are conveyed to others?

I would say through examples, narratives, stories or what some refer to as myths.

V. Principle Five: Freedom of Conscience and Democratic Process within Our Congregations and Society at Large

Quote from essayist Earl K. Holt III,

“What is unique and precious to Unitarian Universalism is that we affirm no external authority in our religious lives, not of church or creed or Bible, but hold as authoritative only the internal voice of conscience that speaks in every human soul.”

What does conscience mean to you?

One way of looking at it is as internal guidance for acting in the world, which is related to the previous discussion of Principle Four and the commitment to an experientially derived, integrated set of personal values. (Note that in Lawrence Kohlberg’s developmental model for moral reasoning this was placed at stage six. A stage that is rarely achieved. So rare, in fact, that it is often left out of the model on the grounds that there is insufficient exemplar data to validate it.

How might Freedom of Conscience be related to encouraging members of UU congregations to seek their own spiritual path?

One reply might be that there is a significant overlap between the evolution of one’s conscience and seeking to live a spiritual life.

The U.S. is one country that exempts from participation in a war on the basis of conscientious objection. Legally this is limited to individuals who are practicing members of a recognized religion that teaches non-violence or pacifism as a doctrine.

Could a UU qualify for this exemption? Explain.

Probably not, since UU have no official doctrine or creed **requiring** its members to adhere to non-violence or pacifism.

What does the word “democracy” mean to you?

Democracy is a form of government in which the people have the authority to

deliberate and decide legislation, or to choose governing officials to do so. A viable democracy requires a guarantee of a range of possible individual rights to prevent the majority from abusing minorities.

Why does the UUA, a religious organization, promote a political process - democracy?

The essay on Principle Five suggests that it is because the right to self government arises from a religious conviction that people are not divine puppets and have the capacity to shape their own destiny.

Why are freedom of conscience and democratic processes linked in Principle Five?

The essay on Principle Five suggests that it is because self government through democratic processes is critical to the protection of freedom of conscience, which subsumes freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

Closing Quote from the late Rev. Paul H. Beattie:

The survival of our religious movement or any like it will always be in doubt, not from without but [from] within, for in each age large numbers of people will be anxious and ready to abandon this approach to religion for something which seem to promise greater certainty, greater assurance. We have to learn and relearn in each generation how wonderful it is to say to each person who comes to us: in religion -- in life -- you must learn to think for yourself and act for yourself -- no one can or should do it for you.

VI. Principle Six: The Goal of World Community with Peace, Liberty and Justice for All

Quote from Henry Commager's *A Declaration of Interdependence* cited by the essay author, John Buehrens:

“When in the course of history the threat of extinction confronts humankind, it is necessary for the people of this nation to declare their interdependence with the people of all nations and to embrace those principles and build those institutions which will enable us to survive and civilization to flourish...all the peoples and nations of the globe should acknowledge their interdependence and acknowledge that the forces that unite us are incomparably deeper than those that divide us -- that all people are part of one global community, dependent upon one body of resources, bound together by the ties of a common humanity and associated in a common adventure on the planet Earth.

What do you think is the most critical ingredient required for a true world community?

I think that a significant proportion of the world population must grow up. By this I mean the developmental level of their cognitive skills are sufficient to support a worldcentric perspective on the planet. At present all the available evidence suggests that maybe half of the populations of the developed countries are at or approaching the critical level of late sociocentric (formal operations - ability to take a 3rd person perspective). In the rest of those populations egocentric (preoperational - only able to take a 1st person perspective), early sociocentric (concrete operations - ability to take a 2nd person perspective) thinking persists. The egocentric and early sociocentric stages constitute significant minority perspectives in developed countries resulting in serious cultural disconnects. In less developed countries these two perspectives are probably in the majority.

In the opening quote there was a reference to “the forces that unite us.” What might those forces be and why are they uniting forces?

I would suggest that they are the needs that we share in common such as those laid out by the developmental psychologist, Abraham Maslow, in his hierarchy of needs; e.g., physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, self actualization and self-transcendence. When these needs are thwarted, especially the two most basic needs, expect conflict.

In the opening quote there was a reference to “dependence on one body of resources.” What are these resources and how can they be sustained and equably shared?

I would suggest that first and foremost they are the essentials of life: clean air, clean water, adequate shelter and fertile land. In addition, there are needs related to energy that are essential for accomplishing the work necessary for a planet wide civilization. Finally, there are the raw materials to produce essential goods. Equable sharing will require a true unification of purpose and agreement on the means required to accomplish such sharing.

Principle Six posits that a world community should engender “peace, liberty and justice for all.” This clearly takes us into the realm of politics and governance. What form would governance of a world community have to take in order to make these concepts concrete realities in practice?

To be frank, I don’t think I have sufficient imagination to conjure up any unique response to this challenge. The only thing that I can suggest is a constitutional republic similar in some respects to the governance of the U.S. but carefully designed to avoid some of the pitfalls that the U.S. has stumbled into. I think that two such pitfalls are a failure to achieve true representativeness and corruption of the governance process by the temptations of power.

Finally, why do you think the UU adopted Principle Six as one of its seven guiding principles?

I think this principle reflects the historical and contemporary engagement of the UUA in efforts to promote the concept of a world community.

To close, I will offer a short quote from the document “Toward a Global Ethic” produced by the Parliament of World Religions and endorsed by the UUA, which is a member organization:

“A better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws alone... Both the hearts and minds of women and men must be addressed...Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed also.”

VII. Principle Seven: Respect for the Interdependent Web of Existence of which We are a Part

Barbara Merritt, the essay's author, explains that the independent web of life is not just a poetic metaphor. It is a fact of our existence. It is an essential way of understanding the world that we live in. It is evident in the phenomenon of entanglement, brought to us by quantum physics, that ties together every particle in the universe. It is evident from the findings in biology that has made us aware of the ecological system that blankets the planet.

We are told by some philosophers that our very identity as individuals derives from relationship and connection. The web of life is foundational to relationship and connection.

What do you think the “Interdependent Web of Existence” is Comprised of?

Clearly, all of the material dimensions of this world that support life. The atmosphere, soil of all types and water. We find living in each of these environments a multitude of living entities from fungi to trees and from bacteria to plant life and animals. In short, every form of life on this planet is a part of the web of life and all of it is dependent upon the air, water and soil that is the environment upon which life depends. Likewise, living entities depend upon one another for sustenance and support from the bacteria that inhabit the intestines of living creatures to the plants eaten by animals for sustenance to the prey eaten by predators. It is an entangled, organic whole not a collection of independent parts. Damage to the atmosphere damages the whole, damage to the water damages the whole, damage to the soil damages the whole, damage to a living aspect of the whole is damage to the whole. Damage to the web of life is like pulling threads of yarn from a knit sweater. Pull enough threads and the sweater will disintegrate.

Unitarian Universalists place a strong emphasis on independence and freedom. In what ways might this be an aid or a hindrance when it comes to participating in the web of life?

It could be an aid if we recognize that while we are free and independent beings, we also have a responsibility to serve the larger context in which we exercise our freedom and independence. When we recognize the importance of the context in which we live, our freedom and independence can enhance the effectiveness of our actions in support of that context.

Unitarian Universalist committed to Principle Seven conscientiously act to repair, restore and promote the web of life. As an individual, how can such a commitment be expressed in your daily life?

Where we direct our attention to a large extent determines who we are. Thus, we should be attentive to the choices that we make throughout each day and ask ourselves what consequences might this choice have for the web of life. For example, are we contributing to the exploitation of other human beings (e.g. by purchases we make), are we contributing to the suffering of other animals that share the web of life with us (e.g., by subjecting them to slaughter houses), are we contributing to pollution of the water or soil that the web of life depends upon (e.g. through careless disposal of waste), are we contributing to the pollution of the atmosphere and the air that all breathing animals depend upon (e.g., air pollution from noxious gases) and are we contributing to the degradation of the climate patterns that heat and cool our world (e.g., by unnecessary air travel).

What are some ways in which we can tell by observing others if they are committed to supporting the web of life?

The author of the essay offers these suggestions:

- a. How do they relate to strangers that they come into contact with?
- b. Are they kind to other living creatures?
- c. Do they act to facilitate the well being of others and especially those in need?
- d. Do they show awareness of their personal impact on the natural environment?
- e. Do they work to build relationship with those that they may have dismissed or ignored in the past?
- f. Do they endeavor to make themselves more conscious and compassionate so as to bring themselves into “right relationship” with generations yet to come?

A short quote from the essay:

The Unitarian novelist, Herman Melville, wrote:

“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us...and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects. On a daily basis, we affect the web of all existence, just as we are affected by it.”

Concluding Commentary

Comments on the Seven Principles

David Center

After facilitating a discussion of the book With Purpose and Principles edited by Edward Frost for a book group and facilitating a series of discussions with the congregants at MLUUC, I have a few general thoughts that I want to share that I have taken from the above experiences.

Broadly speaking, it seems to me that problems in promoting and practicing many of the principles ultimately depends on *judgment*. Not judgment of the principles but judgment of self and others. Being *non-judgmental* of oneself and of others makes possible, for example, such things as recognition of inherent worth, compassion and acceptance, among other qualities. Non-judgment also is important for being able to encourage spiritual growth in self and others and a search for Truth and meaning in self and supporting the same in others. Being non-judgmental makes possible an act of *identification*, which is critical for being able to identify with the other and to feel a sense of *unity* with him or her.

Some recent research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy and counseling examined the problem of failure of these efforts to help some clients. What the study revealed was that many people who failed to benefit had a common *self-judgment*. The self-judgment evident in many such participants was that they didn't deserve to get better. Clearly, self-judgment can thwart the efforts even of someone who has sought help with their problems. Likewise, judgment of others can thwart efforts that you make to be accepting of, respectful of, compassionate toward or otherwise fully open and supportive of others. While facilitating discussions of the seven principles, I have heard people say or imply that they found this to be difficult or impossible with some people.

Further, some of the other principles promote values like democratic processes, world community and the interdependent web of existence. Acting on these and other similar values also cause some people difficulties. I would suggest that problems acting from these values are also related to judgment. To be non-judgmental in these instances requires feeling a sense of unity with the people voting, with people unknown to you and living in other cultures and about efforts to preserve the interdependent web of existence.

The ability to be non-judgmental largely comes down to one's perspective. Western culture, in particular, tends to hold to perspectives that interfere with being non-judgmental. One such perspective is *materialism*. Adherents to a materialist

perspective largely accept the scientific materialist hypothesis that the universe came into existence through an inexplicable cosmic accident (the so-called Big Bang). Further, the unfolding of that event through time and space progresses through an evolutionary process governed by random events that determine the direction that the unfolding takes. In this view, the universe and any life in it came about through a random process. Being a random process, the outcomes are accidental and imply no purpose, and lacking purpose has no meaning. So it is a purely nihilistic view in which there is no reason to cultivate a non-judgmental perspective. Alternatively, there are traditional religious perspectives held by many people in the West, which are mostly *dualistic* views that see the world as a moral battle between good and evil, the damned and the saved. Such a perspective is clearly built upon a foundation of judgment.

Christian Unitarianism held that God is One. I would also suggest that the One God would be all inclusive. If God is all inclusive, then everything that exists is a manifestation of God, which includes every living thing. All is in God, which is not the traditional Christian understanding of God. In other words, panentheism (all-in-God), which should not to be confused with pantheism (all-is-God), to use a religious term or to use more philosophic terms *nondualism* or *monistic idealism*.

Further, Christian Universalism held that every living being is, at root and in the eyes of God, divine whether or not they recognize this, are Christians or have even heard of Jesus. If every being is at root divine, then each is a part of God or Source, if you prefer. There is at root no separation between living entities. They all arise from the same Source and return to that Source when they transition from the material world. Think of waves arising from the ocean and collapsing back into the ocean.

I have argued in a critical post on my website (*Standing on the Side of Love*) that Unitarian Universalism, largely without realizing it, implies a nondual perspective. A perspective in my view that could more easily lead to non-judgment in the practice of the seven principles. I don't think the UUA considers itself to be promoting such a perspective, and if it does, it hasn't articulated it very well. The best articulations of a nondual perspective can be found in some Eastern religious philosophies, e.g., Tantra and in philosophical idealism in the West. To anyone interested, I would suggest the writings of Christopher Wallis on Tantra and those of Bernardo Kastrup on idealism. You will also find a number of posts on my website (davidcenter.com/wp) that address nondualism and idealism. You might begin with the brief posts *Standing on the Side of Love* and *Love and Hate in Human Thought*.

In both posts, I suggest that "evil" is essentially the face of ignorance. The ignorance is an ignorance about the divine nature of humanity and oneself. In a philosophical system arising from some forms of Eastern thought, the spiritual nature of people is viewed as being manifest along a bipolar dimension that runs from ignorant to enlightened with many points in between. Thus, one can forgive an ignorant person while at the same time rejecting "evil" actions that result from that ignorance. This is possible because at their core they are a manifestation of divinity, God or Source.

The prevalence of ignorance among human beings and the difficulties of overcoming it underlies the concept of reincarnation in some of these philosophical systems. Reincarnation is the method by which the many lifetimes needed to overcome ignorance and achieve enlightenment is accomplished. All people evolve and grow spiritually, but it often isn't apparent in the course of a single, brief human lifetime. Treating people who engage in "evil" actions, arising from ignorance, with respect, dignity and justice while resisting and preventing their behavior is viewed as more likely to facilitate their spiritual evolution than being vengeful toward them and imposing demeaning and cruel punishments.

There is one caveat on taking a nondual perspective. While conceptually learning about a nondual perspective can be useful, to truly embody it you need to experience it. Trying to understand nondualism purely through the intellect is a bit like trying to imagine what chocolate taste like having never experienced the taste before. It is fine to study nondualism enough to get the basic ideas involved in a nondual perspective. However, you should then spend your time on contemplation and meditation to open yourself to the experience. As the Kriya yoga master Sri Yogananda advised his students, "Read a little and meditate a lot."

I have been meditating pretty much daily for over a dozen years now and have come to practice what I refer to as gestalt-field meditation as a way of being open to nondual experience. It is a method that I would be happy to teach to anyone interested. I can't guarantee that this or any other method will definitely get you to an experience of nonduality. You just have to be open to it and be patient. In the meantime, one should go as far as possible with practicing the principles based on a purely conceptual understanding of non-judgment and a nondual perspective.

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