7 Principles, 6 Sources

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, August 11, 2019

One thing that I have come to understand about Unitarian Universalists is that by and large, we are people who value integrity. We find it important that our words and actions align *and* that our words and beliefs align. Deeds not creeds, we say. We have a hard time reciting statements of belief that either disagree with our own sense of reason or are at odds with our lived experience. We seek community with each other to do as poet and author D.H. Lawrence once said, “A [person] has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one’s religion is never complete and final, but must always be undergoing modification.”

In other words, beliefs grow and change over time, shaped by the events that happen on the journey through life. Beliefs are personal and individual. No two of us believe exactly the same way. This is what it means to be part of the pluralistic faith tradition that is Unitarian Universalism.

I’ve often heard it said that being Unitarian Universalist means you can believe whatever you want, which is only partially true. Each of us is free to choose what we believe, but there are limits. Rebecca Parker, who served for 25 years as president of Starr King School for the Ministry and now serving as Associate Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. put it this way in her essay titled The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology: “While we are open to many things, you can’t really believe *anything* and be a UU. There are limits. Unitarian Universalism is not an empty cipher. It is not nothing. It is something.”

She goes on to say: “You can be devoted to a specific religious practice – Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, or pagan ritual (to name a few). But you cannot hold the view that there is one religion [or faith perspective] that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism.”

In other words, no matter how firmly held our beliefs are, not a one of us holds the corner on truth. What then are the limits, the boundaries that define this open and free faith of ours? We know from biology that cells are a fundamental form of life and that each cell has a membrane that is essential to its existence – a boundary that is both protective and permeable allowing some things to flow in and other things to flow out.

In a non-creedal faith such as ours, what is the cellular membrane that defines us and holds us together? In the past couple of weeks, we looked at some historical roots from our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors as they struggled with these same questions. There we found some things that hold us together: the making of covenants which are sacred promises we make to each other and to life, and our long-held tradition of congregational polity, which is a firm commitment to the self-governance of each of our congregations and a firm commitment to the interconnection with our sibling congregations.

Today I turn attention to our current time and the boundary or membrane that defines Unitarian Universalism as it is practiced now; 7 principles and 6 sources. These principles and sources did not miraculously appear one day, carved in stone and handed down from on high. They grew from roots established long ago, roots that have grown into the branches of the diverse and pluralistic faith we know today.

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, they created a unified statement of principles that reflected what each side of the family tree brought to the table, the Universalists’ professions of faith which had been revised and rewritten several times over the years, and the Unitarians’ more loosely held statements of principle, which had also been revised and rewritten several times.

The 1960’s were tumultuous times. The Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation movements and the war in Viet Nam were all taking place just as the fledgling Unitarian Universalist Association was finding its feet. At the time of merger, traditional Christian and humanistic perspectives in Universalism and Unitarianism required much in the way of compromise. Having been written by ministers who were all men, the original statement of principles was soon revised to use more gender inclusive language.

In the mid-70’s a call came for a major rewrite of the principles. The call came in the form of a Women and Religion Resolution. What was wanted was the dismantling of hierarchical and patriarchal structures present in the association of UU congregations and reflected in the statement of principles. It took several years of theological debates and failed attempts at revision on the floor of the General Assembly, of consultation with congregations, and the forming of committees until finally, 7 principles and 5 sources were adopted as a bylaw of the UUA in 1985, the principles being a set of ethical statements that we hold in common and the sources being the diverse theological wisdom from which our living tradition is drawn. The 6th source was added in 1996. There was an attempt at a major revision in 2008, but it was resoundingly voted down by the General Assembly.

Now that you know some of the history of how the principles came to be: quick survey: which of the principles do you quote most often? Show of hands: 1? 7? 4? 2? 3? 5? 6? I believe our most quoted principles are the first and the seventh.

There is a beauty to the structure of the statement of principles. They lead us from individuality deeper into community and out into connection with the larger world.

The first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every person is an affirmation of our individuality and our right to be valued for who we are, whatever our identities.

The second principle: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations is about how we are with each other, how we strive to be in relationship with other individuals.

The third principle: acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, moves us beyond one-on-one relationships into concern for the larger whole of which we are apart. It also speaks to the larger purpose of congregational life, which is spiritual growth, which for some among us may be better understood as ethical and moral growth. This principle recognizes that in a pluralistic setting such as ours, acceptance of one another is part of how we grow ethically, morally, and spiritually.

The fourth principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning is a hard one. We often get enamored with the *free* part and forget the *responsible* part. To be responsible is to be accountable to ourselves and each other. It matters what we believe. A responsible search for truth and meaning means that we don’t entertain beliefs that exclude, divide, uphold privilege, or promote hate and fear as these are damaging to the fabric of community.

The fifth principle: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large, like the fourth principle, is about being an individual within community. It’s about listening to and refining a moral conscience and then bringing that conscience to matters that affect us all. It’s about bringing your voice and your vote to the public square of congregational life.

This is the principle that leads us out into connection with the larger world. It calls us to bring our voices and our votes to the public square of civic life. I have to say that at this time in history, this principle is a moral imperative, something we must faithfully do if we are to save our society from further collapse into environmental degradation, racism, corruption, and authoritarianism. In society at large, raising our voices in protest, calling our elected representatives to task, and voting our conscience – these are acts of faith for Unitarian Universalists.

The sixth principle: the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all widens our concern beyond self, beyond congregation, beyond city, beyond state, beyond country and into concern with our human kin worldwide. Our concern is for the alleviation of human suffering, bondage, and oppression wherever it exists.

The seventh principle: respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part reminds us that we are connected not just to the people of the earth. We are connected to and interdependent with the earth. Though this may be one of our most quoted principles, it is also the hardest to live. It calls us to be aware of our impact on each other and this, our shared home, our beautiful planet Earth.

These seven principles have stood the test of time, though there are proposals to change the first principle to respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all beings and to add an eighth principle, the proposed text being “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

And so, our principles evolve to reflect our current time and growing awareness.

The 7 principles are drawn from our Unitarian and Universalist histories and from 6 sources of wisdom. You will note that the sources, like the principles, begin with the individual: direct experience of that transcendent mystery and wonder, present in all cultures. The sources begin with the individual and broaden out to include, prophetic words and deeds of women and men, which, by vote of the General Assembly has been changed to prophetic words and deeds of people, moving us beyond the gender binary to be ever more inclusive of those who identify as transgender and/or non-binary. This in itself is worth a whole sermon, which I am glad to offer if someone will gently remind me. I only have so much time left with you during this interim ministry.

The sources broaden out from the words and deeds of individual people to the world religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings, and spiritual teachings of earth-based traditions.

These 7 principles and 6 sources are like our cellular membrane, the boundary that defines us, a boundary that is both protective and permeable. Living within this boundary is both beautiful and challenging. Its beauty is its challenge and its challenge is also its beauty. We are like a bouquet of flowers, different varieties, sizes, shapes, textures, and colors come together to make something that no one flower could make on its own. The challenge is to not to compete, but to complement, to come together as one cohesive whole. And this, my friends, is beautiful.

My religious identity is Unitarian Universalist. I lean into and draw wisdom from all of our sources, therefor not feeling the need to hyphenate as a UU-Humanist or a UU-Christian or a UU-Buddhist or a UU- Pagan, all of which fit, but none encompass all of who I am religiously and spiritually. UU encompasses it all and I am grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles my faith, our faith, this living tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

May we continue to grow and evolve with integrity to meet the world we live in today. May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be.