

Living the Tradition

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How many times have we each heard someone from another denomination ask us—"So, what do Unitarian Universalist's believe?" Some know that we have no creed, others think of us only as some heretical tradition that doesn't believe in Jesus. Still others believe we lump all traditions together. I have had to answer this question more than once. Both the Unitarians and the Universalist have their roots in the Judeo-Christian. The Unitarians were established in America in the early 1800's with a sermon by William Ellery Channing. In it, he distinguished the Unitarians from the Orthodoxy by declaring that reason had to be applied in interpreting the bible, just as with any other book. Parts of the bible were indeed divinely inspired, while other parts were clearly not. He also declared that what made Jesus important was not his death and resurrection, but the example of his life- a religious and ethical life of principle.

The Universalists came to America in the late 1700's and their message was one of Universal Salvation. Calvinism preached that only certain elect people would be saved, and the Universalist believed that was a miss interpretation of the Bible. From these early beginnings, through the 20th century, both traditions have grown and expanded.

Today these two traditions have merged into a single denomination. Since the early days of both traditions there has been resistance to establishing a particular creed or statement of belief. We have united by covenant, a sacred agreement that we will worship together, work together and respect one another in our differences.

Our tradition is grounded in the here and now, and stands on the principle that "Faith without works is dead" Ours is a Tradition of Action— This action finds its life in the way in which we live out the principles of our traditions.

The principles of our tradition are not a creed, they are commonly accepted truths which we, as a congregation, agree to affirm and promote. They are not just something to be tacked on the wall of our church bulletin boards. They are guidelines for living a religious life. They challenge us to live fully in our congregation, in our community, and with the whole world. Diversity is not just a catch phrase or sound bite in our tradition, it is our covenant to each other.

There are 7 Principle and Purposes that were approved at two consecutive General Assembly meetings in 1984 and 1985. They are written as a covenant.

We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We believe that each and every person is important

This is a statement about our basic belief in humanity. Regardless of one's actions, we are all inherently worthy. The choices that one makes may not be good choices, but that does not mean such a person is inherently bad. We believe in free will and the ability to choose our own path.

The challenge for each of us in our daily lives is to bring the notion of worth and dignity to every person we meet.

The Buddhists speak of loving kindness and compassion. Jack Kornfield offers a meditation in his book "A Path With Heart" that can help us to change how we perceive ourselves in difficult relationships. He asks us to "imagine that the Earth is filled with Buddha's everyone that you encounter is enlightened —except yourself.

Imagine that they are here to teach you. They are acting solely for your benefit, to provide the teachings and difficulties that you need to awaken." This perspective can change the way we see ourselves in relationship to others, and help us to recognize the worth and dignity in others that we may be reluctant or unable to see.

In discussing this principle the question almost always arises, "How does one react to those who are racist, anti-Semitic, bigoted, or homophobic? Where is the lesson in that? What does someone who acts like that have to offer me?" I believe that people who behave in this manner are worthy of our compassion. They are still persons of worth and dignity, no matter what they may believe. Martin Buber a Jewish theologian speaks of the importance of the "I - Thou relationship." This is a relationship in which we remember that we are speaking to another human being. It genuinely takes into account both self and other. When we forget that, and I would suggest that those who are racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic etc. do forget that, we move into an "I- It" relationship and we objectify the another. Buber states that "I - Thou" is the realm of relationship, and "I - It" is the realm of separation. As Unitarian Universalists, our principles ask us to strive for the "I -Thou" relationship in all situations.

We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, and we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. **We believe that our church are places where all people are accepted, and where we keep on learning together.**

We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life. We are no longer a world of isolated places and ideas, the technology with which we live has created a world community. In this world community there are many different ideas and notions of what truth is, and how to bring meaning to our lives. I believe that Unitarian Universalism offers one an opportunity to explore many different religious traditions and beliefs in a supportive and encouraging environment. We affirm and promote this search, and challenge one another to continue deepening and developing into wholeness. Ours is not just a free search, but a responsible one as well. This requires us to accept responsibility for our actions and for our own spiritual growth.

We have the freedom to incorporate all of these traditions into how we see the world. We can be in dialogue with all of these traditions because there is nothing in our tradition that says that we are the only way to God. I can say with some surety that what I think of as true and right is not what Pat Robertson thinks of as true and right, but that does not make either of us wrong.

Acceptance of one another goes beyond tolerance. According to the World Book Dictionary to tolerate is: *to allow or permit, to bear; endure; put up with.* (the sentence they give is "A free nation tolerates all religions.") Acceptance is defined as: *the taking of something offered or given; favorable reception; approval; a taking as true or satisfactory; belief.* Accepting an others beliefs does not mean that we must change our own, it means that we move away from "putting up with" to "taking as true or satisfactory" **for another.** I would offer the challenge to each of us to go beyond tolerance to acceptance. What I consider odious is when one tries insist that their way is the only way - when they have trouble with tolerance. It is not always easy to maintain an open mind about an other's religious views, especially if they are in conflict with our own. But here I would remind us all to try to remember and maintain the "I-Thou" relationship as a way of seeking to understand each other. It is my responsibility to bring myself to the search for truth and meaning with integrity and honesty. It is not necessarily my responsibility or my goal to change someone else's mind.

We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our community and the community at large.

We believe that all people should have a voice and a vote about the things which concern them

The right of conscience in the UU tradition is something that I hold dear. The democratic process allows everyone a voice to discuss an issue and to come away with their own opinion. I, or any of us, can hold views that don't necessarily fit the majority. The democratic process allows us to make persuasive arguments to bring people to our point of view. This process of discernment helps each of develop and hone our skills, not just in politics but in critical thinking in general .

In the congregation our voting makes a difference in how we do things, who will lead us, where will put our money, our time, our energy. Those who are in the majority have an obligation to listen to those in minority positions. It is tempting to ignore or walk away from them, to dismiss them. Yet our first principle challenges us to face them, and to be in dialogue with them. The minority helps keep balance in our congregations, our communities and our government. The dissenting voices sometimes ask us to look at issues in ways that we may not have considered. We are all different and we have different ways of seeing the world. This process helps us share that world with one another and helps us to learn and grow together.

We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

We covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

We believe that all people should be treated fairly.

We believe that we should work for a peaceful and free world.

Human rights are at the heart of all our traditions and principles. Working for peace and a free world here and now should be the work of any religious institution. The prophets of the Hebrew bible, Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. preached of freedom for those who were oppressed. The Buddha spoke of freedom from the cycles of life and death. This is a universal truth in all religions that we must work together to bring about the world we seek.

UU have always worked for equality and human rights. We were involved in the struggle against slavery, the fight for women's suffrage, and the underground movement providing support during the Nazi regime. We actively worked for civil rights in the sixties, women's rights in the seventies, and gay rights in the nineties. As well as fighting for human rights all over the world. Again we see that deeds and not words are at the heart of our principles.

There are so many ways to incorporate justice and equality into our lives. Some hold it as a religious principle and others may actively work in the political arena. We may attend the welcoming congregation, or march in protest rallies. Some of us support groups like Amnesty International or even the UUSC or we may write letters to our public officials. Some participate in the democratic process by voting their conscience. Even our individual conversations we can incorporate justice and equality into the lives of those around us. Our tradition supports the individual's right to be treated fairly in the hopes that we can all come to an acceptance of one another in a community of justice where all are equal.

We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

We believe that we should care for our planet earth

The Barthian notion of a transcendent God has brought some to think that the earth is unimportant and only a short stopping place on the way to heaven. As Unitarian Universalists, we reject his model and believe that people are beginning to realize this planet is not expendable. We are coming to the understanding that the earth cannot continue to be treated with disregard. We are asking ourselves and each other to accept responsibility and live in the knowledge that we are a part of the

interdependent web of life. We humans are not outside the web. This perspective brings about a different set of guidelines for how we treat the planet. Living this principle means being conscious of how we live our lives, our habits, our purchases, and even the companies we work for and how our choices impact the earth.

Living as part of the web of life means living with intention and honoring and respecting all life. The Native Americans used every part of the animal they killed, they would bury the heart and thank the Spirit of the animal for giving it's life to keep them alive. It's easy to forget that much of our food come from animals (those of us who are meat eaters) and from the earth when we buy most of our food in the grocery store. It seems to me that the only time most of us acknowledge our gratitude for this sacrifice of food is on Thanksgiving. Trying to maintain this consciousness at every meal is a challenge.

For some of us the challenge comes in knowing when we have enough. The media messages are constantly telling us that we need more, that consuming will make us feel better. But knowing that we have enough is a vital step toward conservation. Conservation might just be the key to our role in the web. As humans we have upset the balance of the food cycle by our past lack of consciousness. As we now begin to conserve our consumption of goods, of fuel energy, of food and resources— we begin to set our part of the web right again.

Our Principles and Purposes are grounded in our past, lived in the present and our hope for the future. Ours is a tradition that expects much. We do not offer answers. What we do offer is an opportunity for each person to be challenged by the questions and to deepen our understanding of others and the world around us. We offer each other the responsibility and potential for acceptance. We offer the world a model that is badly needed- a model that speaks of truth and equality, compassion and justice. This is the promise of our principles and purposes.

My fourth grade teacher, Ms. McCarthy, used to tell us all the time, “actions speak louder than words.” I have come to believe this is quite true. And as Kahlil Gibran states, “Who can separate their faith from their actions or their belief from their occupations?” We can live these principles every day in all we do and say. We can model them for our children, for our co-workers, for our family, and for others. The principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association are excellent guidelines for living in a way that can lead us to the truth of our spirit. We can, in the words of Jacob Trapp “open the window of worship from dawn to dawn.” Living consciously, acting consciously, being consciously— these are the goals we strive for as individuals and as a community of faith.