

Handout

Principles of a Free Faith

In our hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*), as well as in many pamphlets and other UU publications, you will find our Unitarian Universalist “Principles and Purposes” statement. This statement was written not by a bishop, not by any ecclesiastical order, not even by God. It came out of the hearts and minds of the people who made up the Unitarian Universalist Association in the first half of the 1980s, when these “Principles and Purposes” (and “sources”) were written and agreed upon. If you didn’t take part in writing them yourself, people a lot like you did.

The Principles are not dogma or doctrine, but rather a guide for those of us who choose to join and participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities. They help us in the ongoing creation of our congregations, as we covenant to try to live up to the spirit of these Principles.

I suggest that two of the seven Principles form the backbone of our faith; they are the pillars that help define and support our spiritual community. I refer to the first and the seventh, which in my view are the closest Unitarian Universalism comes to a true and absolute faith statement.

The first Principle is the one that affirms and reminds us that all people have inherent worth and dignity. It is this Principle that recognizes our common humanity, our common worth, and even our common ability to screw up. In an address to a large group of Unitarian Universalist ministers a few years ago, the great Christian preacher and social activist William Sloane Coffin reminded his listeners that St. Paul was right by noting that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “At least we’re one in sin,” said Coffin, “which is no mean bond, because it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment. That’s the meaning of the scriptural injunction ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’”

In today’s world we are called upon to not throw stones at each other, even when doing so might make us feel better and more virtuous. It is easy to blame others for the violence, the poverty, the debilitating anger that often seems to pervade our world. It is harder to look at ourselves and recognize that we are all both a part of the problem and a part of the solution. However, to really be a part of that solution is, as Paul Tillich once said, to “be grasped by the power of love.”

Love is really what the first UU Principle is all about. It is a radical love that challenges us to seek not separation, but relationship and connection. As William Sloane Coffin said later in his talk, “Human unity is not something we are called on to create, only to recognize and make manifest.”

If we are to be true to our faith, then we must see our first Principle as a powerful reminder of the strength and dignity inherent in the human spirit, even in the spirits of those with armored hearts. For me, the first Principle is a holy reminder, showing me a path through life that begins with relationship and acceptance, not separation and denial. It is deeply spiritual and imminently prac-

tical as it offers us tools for how to live. Respect, worth, and dignity are powerful words, powerful challenges about how to live.

Our seventh Principle is, in my view, the other pillar that supports our faith. It reminds us that we are all a part of the interdependent web of existence. This Principle calls us, as my colleague David Bumbaugh has written, “to a reverence for the world . . . this miraculous world of our everyday existence.” Can we seek to move through this world with respect and love for our fellow human beings and also learn that the same basic respect and love must be given to the animals, the trees, the hills, the valleys, even the earth and stones on which we stand?

This is a challenging Principle, for it asks us to see the holy very differently from the way most religious traditions see it. The holy, it reminds us, is not only found in sacred scripture, in religious leaders, in a God that is far away. No, the holy is found right here, in every blade of grass, every drop of rain, every creature that walks or crawls or slithers on this planet. Finding holiness in the everydayness of life is extremely difficult and quite simple. It is difficult because it is so commonplace.

The old saying that you can’t see the forest for the trees is relevant here. We often can’t see the forest, in all its beauty and interdependence, because we’re just looking at trees as commodities, as things to be used. Learning to truly see a tree is a deeply spiritual act, just as is learning to truly see a red-winged blackbird, a dying crocus, or a broken rock.

Yet it can be simple to remember the holiness in everyday life, simple because the holy calls to us if we choose to hear. It really is all around us all the time. It is in our backyards, in our workplaces; it is here right now among us; it is in the rainbow shining in the sky. Our seventh Principle is a deeply spiritual guide, reminding us how important it is to seek the holy in all of life.

These two Principles—affirming the worth and dignity of every human being and seeing ourselves as a part of the interdependent web of existence—are strong pillars for our faith. They are also, in their essence, directly linked. Both of them are really about love—a radical love that knows no boundaries.

The first Principle is embedded in the seventh. If we really are all interconnected in the web of existence, then human beings are inherently part of that boundless love. (“I am part and parcel of God,” said Emerson.) If more people believed this way, then perhaps more anger and violence could be prevented. Those who kill or act violently usually believe that no one loves them, and their hearts become armored, unable to love or show compassion toward themselves or others.

Our UU Principles challenge us to imagine and affirm a different way: a path of life that sees the hope in every child, the possibilities in every life. The world needs people and religious philosophies that don’t separate the saved from the damned. The world needs congregations in which difference is celebrated. The world needs places where children and youth and adults and elders can gather to learn and mentor each other. The world needs you, your congregation, your Unitarian Universalism.

Many years ago, our religious forebears put our UU Principles into action when they stood up against slavery, worked for the rights of women, built more humane institutions, and challenged those who would lead us into war. Today the world requires of us the courage to stand up once again to injustice and tyranny.

When we live the Principle that all people have worth and dignity, we must stand up to those who would deny the human rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. If we believe in our Principle that all of life is interconnected, we are challenged to confront corporations that are polluting our water. And when we seek to live the radical love that is at the heart of both of these principles, we can develop compassion not only for those killed, but also for those doing the killing. These and other acts like them are not just good things to do. They are deeply spiritual.

I believe the first and seventh Principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith strongly support the other five Principles, together offering us spiritual and practical guidelines for understanding the message of our religion. If we truly live by these Principles, not only will we be better people, but our world will be a better place.

Barbara Wells