

A Free and Responsible Search©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Congratulations! Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!
You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And *YOU* are the person who'll decide where to go.

With this beginning Dr. Seuss tells a story of what a person might encounter on the journey of life. While this book was written for children, we adults might find important messages in it as well. In the portion I just read there is so much packed into so few words. It begins with the announcement that today is important and that the journey to great places begins now. Then it goes on to affirm that "you can steer yourself any direction you choose" and ends with "YOU are the person who'll decide where to go." I don't know if Dr. Seuss had any religious affiliation but what he has written here seems to fit well with a perspective that is commonly held within Unitarian Universalism, that each person be allowed the opportunity to determine the direction their journey will lead them. This concept is at the core our Fourth Principle, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

From the book's title, a person might initially think the focus is on destinations. It soon becomes clear however that the journey, while very important, is no more important than a second element, the search—the search for the direction the journey ought to go. As is the case for each of us, in the journey of life we arrive at any number of destinations. Throughout the journey though, we are continually searching—searching for answers, searching for direction, searching for security, searching for adventure, searching for purpose—the list can and does go on and on as long as life continues.

Every person's journey is theirs and theirs alone even though others may journey along with them. Each person's search is unique as well, even when we reach out to others for assistance. As Unitarian Universalists we value and honor each person's search. Yet as we hold each person's search to be important, our Fourth Principle asserts that it is a specific type of search that we encourage and support. The search is to be free and responsible.

It could be helpful here to consider how each of these two words, free and responsible, influence our concept of what our search is to be. So let's begin with free. As we all know there are any number of religious traditions, as well as systems of government, that would stifle one's free search. In such systems people are expected not to search or journey very far from what is held to be the one correct way. Our religious tradition supports and encourages free thought in the realm of religious belief. We are privileged to live in what is known as a "free" country. When we consider what "free" means we come up with words like independent, unconfined, and unconstrained. From my experience, this free aspect of the search is something we Unitarian Universalists hold in very high regard. It is this free aspect that seems to get the most

attention and the most mention. I don't think it is any accident that free precedes responsible in our Principle.

Free doesn't stand alone however. It is accompanied by responsible. Now, it needs to be said that responsible doesn't get the same enthusiastic attention that free does. That isn't just the case in UU circles, it is true in many places. Free seems invigorating and exciting. Responsible on the other hand, well, it just doesn't have the same pizzazz. When we consider words that are synonyms for responsible we get a very good sense of its lack of appeal—words such as accountable, bound, and constrained. I don't know about you but being accountable, bound or constrained isn't something that I typically get really enthusiastic about. My emotional reaction to responsible seems to be nearly opposite of what I experience when I think of being free.

That a person would have opposing reactions makes complete sense when we consider the synonyms for these words put in pairs. We have independent/accountable, unconfined/bound, unconstrained/constrained. These pairs would indicate that free and responsible are nearly direct opposites. If that is the case, then our Fourth Principle would seem to be an oxymoron.

Some of you may be perfectly comfortable with these two seemingly opposite requirements for your search. According to Allen Harrison and Robert Bramson, authors of *Styles of Thinking: Strategies for Asking Questions, Making Decisions and Solving Problems*, you are part of a small minority of people in this country. In their research just over 10% of Americans hold, as their dominant way of thinking, a synthesist perspective. "Opposing ideas are the raw materials of synthesis..." which, according to Harrison and Bramson is the primary process in approaching life for the person who is a synthesist thinker.

In parts of the Far East, particularly in areas where the religion of Taoism is prevalent, the question of how a search can be both free and responsible at the same time might be more easily understood and accepted. I would imagine most of you are familiar with the symbol that represents Taoism. The symbol portrays the concept of yin and yang. It is a circle with a gentle "s" shaped division going through it. One side of the circle is almost entirely white with a small black dot in it. The other side is nearly all black with a small white dot in it. The image seeks to portray two apparent opposites, white and black, flowing into and out of one another — each containing some portion of the other. Neither portion is complete in itself. Both are intricately connected and part of the whole. The literal meaning of the Chinese character for Tao is "the way."

The and/also perspective which the yin yang symbol represents is not the norm in our culture, it is the exception. Generally we tend to be more familiar with what I refer to as the either/or approach. The either/or perspective is commonly found in one of the sources that our living tradition draws from, science. Science attempts to identify and classify all manner of things — to put things into specific categories. But some things just don't fit neatly into categories that depend on such an either/or approach. In my experience a lifetime search certainly doesn't.

But how, you might wonder, does this yin/yang, and/also stuff relate to a free and responsible search in life? Let me offer an experience from my younger days as an example. I mentioned before that each of us is searching throughout our lives and the list of things we may be searching for is extensive. In my twenties I had landed my first professional job and I was involved in a close, personal and reasonably stable romantic

relationship. As a result I was feeling accomplished and secure. With things going quite well, I found myself feeling a strong desire for adventure. I set myself the task of fulfilling that desire. It didn't take me long to decide where that adventure would be found. I would find it in the heights. As Dr. Seuss so nicely put it, "Its opener there in the wide open air." Now, there aren't any mountains in northern Illinois so reaching the heights wasn't possible by hiking or climbing. Instead I would need to seek the heights in a different and somewhat unusual manner. I took up the sport of sky diving—going up in an airplane and jumping out while it was thousands of feet above the ground. As you might imagine, my mother didn't think my decision was all that responsible. I had done my research though and found that sky diving was much safer than riding a motorcycle and nearly as safe as going up in a small plane and then landing in it. What many people don't realize is that most fatalities associated with sky diving are the result not of jumping out but of the plane crashing.

For those of you who have never jumped I can tell you the feeling of being free that I had while hurtling toward earth was incredible. It was an experience I will never forget. But the only reason I am able to be here sharing it with you is because of the responsibility element that had been put into it, not just by me but by others as well. I needed to take an eight hour class to prepare myself for a free fall that lasted just seconds and a parachute ride that took only a few minutes. The person who packed my parachute put in at least half an hour to make sure it was packed just so and then another person had to check their work to insure it was done properly.

I recognize that sky diving may be an experience few of you have participated in. Though it may be uncommon, it demonstrates the elements of freedom and responsibility that are intertwined in and inherent to many aspects of our everyday lives. The experience of driving a car is a good example. We can feel a sense of comfort and freedom going down the highway at 80 miles an hour only because the driver and others on the road are acting responsibly.

In sky diving, driving a car, and many other endeavors, freedom and responsibility are inextricably connected. These concepts can best be understood not from an either/or perspective but from the framework of and/also. And whether we recognize it or not, each is necessary for the other to exist.

In our faith community here at UUFb I am convinced we offer a place where people can engage in a search that has a level of freedom not found in most religious establishments in Montana. I believe the freedom we offer has significant value. It is important, however, that we not forget or, worse yet, ignore the second condition that our Fourth Principle addresses—that the search be responsible. It is only when each of us maintains an appropriate and necessary level of responsibility in our search, and in our relations with others, that our Fellowship can survive and thrive. It is as if we assist one another in packing and checking each other's parachutes. When the appropriate balance between free and responsible is found and maintained, each of us has the opportunity to go beyond what would have been possible alone.

We are each on a journey. A journey that is unique and special. On our journey we will find many companions who are searching, just as we are searching. Early in our service we sang "We gather together to join in the journey, confirming, committing our passage to be a true affirmation, in joy and tribulation, when bound to human care and hope—then we are free." May we strive to support and encourage one another on our

journeys. May we seek to find balance as we embrace the yin and the yang of our free and responsible search through the path of life. And as we support and encourage one another and maintain the proper balance between free and responsible may we each soar to heights that we otherwise might not have been able to achieve.

May it be so.