

The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Over the course of the past eight months many of you have heard me speak from this pulpit about each of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. These Seven Principles are of great importance in our faith tradition. Every week you find them printed on your Order of Service. Many people, however, don't know that these Principles hold such a significant place in our faith tradition that they are contained in the Bylaws and Rules of our parent organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association. I imagine that few if any of you have read the full 25 pages of the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws and Rules in your leisure time. Having read it as part of my preparation to become a UU minister, I can tell you that it doesn't have much of a plot, there is no character development and it definitely doesn't qualify as easy reading. That said, you don't have to read far in the document to find the Principles. They are contained in Article II, on the very first page of text. These Principles speak to the values that we, as a member congregation of the UUA, affirm and promote. The values contained in these Principles guide our feet, motivate our hands and stir our hearts.

Yet while the Principles are of great importance to our faith tradition, they haven't been around all that long. They were first voted on at General Assembly a mere 34 years ago this month and the next year the final vote to add them to the bylaws was nearly unanimous. Prior to those two votes however, there was a significant amount of time and effort invested in developing the Principles as they are written today.

We might think that since these are in our bylaws they will never be changed. Well, think again. It was just 9 years ago that an alternate set of Principles was considered at the General Assembly that was held in Salt Lake City. The proposed changes fell just a few votes shy of passage. While the proposed changes to the Principles were voted down, the issue of whether or not to modify our Principles will be considered in future years.

Those of you who feel content with what we have today might wonder why we would consider making changes to these well crafted and well loved statements. I would offer two possible reasons. First, there may come a time when it is felt that the Principles don't reflect some aspect of diversity that may be missing. That is what occurred in regards to the Six Sources of Our Living Tradition that follow immediately after the Seven Principles in the UUA bylaws. Originally there were only Five Sources. The Sixth Source was added in 1995. It states "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." Clearly this Source fits well with our Seventh Principle. And a second possible reason to change what we currently have would be to make the Principles more cohesive and congruent in their entirety.

Some of you may recall my January 21st sermon titled "A Free and Responsible Search" which dealt with our Fourth Principle. In that sermon I stated that the words "free" and "responsible" seem contradictory. At the very least, these two descriptive words are, at times, incongruent when it comes to our search for truth and meaning.

When we look at the Seven Principles together as a unit, we find that there are numerous places where there may be incongruence between two or more of them. It could take hours to point out all of the places and ways that various Principles could be incongruent. So to keep this sermon to a reasonable length, I would have us consider just one example. I would ask you to turn to the back of your Order of Service where you will find our Seven Principles and Six Sources. I want us to look particularly at the Fifth and the Sixth of those Principles. Read them over if you would, and as you do, imagine how these two may not always be compatible.

Several years ago I had a chance to be involved in a situation that demonstrated an incongruence between the values expressed in these two Principles. Those values are, in Principle five, “the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;” and, in Principle six, “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” I was serving the Pocatello Unitarian Universalist Fellowship when this incongruity became very clear to me. The city of Pocatello was in the midst of a controversy at that time. The controversy involved an anti-discrimination ordinance that had the specific intent of protecting people who identified or might be identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. As has been the case in a significant number of communities, this issue was contentious. After the City Council voted to adopt the anti-discrimination ordinance there was a backlash. The backlash came in the form of a citizen-led petition to put the ordinance up for a public vote. Clearly this is an example of the democratic process “in our society at large” just as our Fifth Principle states. Because of my strongly held views about equal rights, I volunteered to canvass against the initiative. I attended a training to prepare me for the work. One of the trainers pointed out to those of us present that putting the issue of civil rights to a vote of the people was simply allowing those who already enjoy all of their rights to determine whether or not others would have the same rights. Our Sixth Principle states very clearly that all people deserve the right to peace, liberty and justice. Making the peace, liberty and justice of a minority who is disempowered dependent upon a majority vote of the public, seems unjust to me. The Civil War this country endured may be an example of how democracy may at times not be the most appropriate or effective approach to insuring the basic human rights of all people.

This is an example of a situation where two of the Principles come into conflict, where they aren't congruent with one another. I am certain there are others. As I stated earlier, our Principles speak to the values that we, as a member congregation of the UUA, affirm and promote. What the example I just shared demonstrates is a values conflict. All of us hold values, some of which are contained in the Seven Principles and some of which may not be. And as is clear in the example I just shared, at times there are incongruities between our values. Situations like the one I just mentioned require us to consider how we will address these values conflicts. How do we find a resolution then when our values are in conflict? At some point in our lives every one of us has had to answer this question. It is probable that we have had to answer it on numerous occasions. While there are as many different answers to the question as there are situations where we ask it, each answer has at least one element that is consistent. That element involves who gets to participate in the resolution process.

It seems to me there are three possible options regarding who gets to participate in finding a resolution to the conflict of values. The first is that a person finds a resolution fully on their own. The second is that a person can ask others what the resolution ought to be. In this situation the decision about what the resolution will be is made by someone other than the person experiencing the values conflict. The third option combines certain elements of the other two. In this option a person seeks out others to assist them in the discernment process. They might ask another person's opinion but they don't abdicate their right or responsibility to make the final decision. On the other hand, by seeking assistance from others the person doesn't make the decision completely independently. Each of these three approaches to finding a resolution might be the best option at one time or another.

As I think about these three options, I am reminded of our Fourth Principle, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." When we are making a decision regarding how we will go about finding a resolution to the values conflict we are faced with, I would suggest we look to the wisdom that is contained in this Principle. The process we utilize ought to be free. In other words, we should do our best to maintain both our right and our responsibility in the decision making process. And the process ought to also be responsible. By responsible I don't mean that we are simply self-reliant as the word sometimes implies. Instead I am advocating that our decision making process includes a degree of accountability, accountability to those we are in relationship with, as well as those who will be affected by the decision we eventually come to.

It is quite likely that in the not-too-distant future many if not all of us will face a conflict in values. The next values conflict we experience may be of a personal nature or it may be communal in nature. Whichever it may be, it will be important for us to utilize the best that we have within us as we seek to find a resolution.

In the days to come I would encourage each of us to live out our Seven Principles to the best of our ability. And as we do so we will at some point discover that our values are at times incongruent or even in conflict. When that time comes this is what I would hope for each of us. That we may be able to recognize the incongruence or the conflict for what it is and that we may face it directly with an open mind and an open heart. When we are able to face the conflict directly and in an open manner, I hope each of us will be willing and able to consider the incongruence or the conflict earnestly and deeply. Then it is my hope that we will seek insight, guidance and/or support from others. And last, but certainly not least, it is my hope that we will strive to respect each person's worth and dignity, accept one another's decisions, and continue to encourage spiritual growth to assist one another as we deal with values conflicts that are a natural part of life. These are my hopes, not just for each of us as individuals but for all of us as a community as well. If my hopes can become a reality, I believe our values conflicts can stimulate and nurture growth and be opportunities for the development of wisdom.

So may it be.