

Theodore Parker Church
A LITTLE UU REVIEW
April 25, 2021

The Akan people of Ghana offer the Sankofa bird image as a symbol of retrieving what is good from the past, bringing it into the present, and using it in order to make positive progress for the future. This week, we'll mirror that practice by looking back a bit at how our Unitarian Universalist Principles came to serve us, and how we might move forward with the existing seven, or maybe even eight.



OPENING WORDS

We Travel This Road Together by [Tess Baumberger](#)

From the busy-ness of everyday we gather once a week
to remember who we are, to dream of who we might become.

We travel this road together.

As companions on this journey, we share the milestones we meet along the way.
Individual moments of joy and sorrow become shared moments of comfort and celebration.

We travel this road together.

We share this journey across differences of belief and opinion
Because we value diversity and because we care for one another.

We travel this road together.

Today as we take the next steps, let us notice our fellow travelers:
the burdens that they carry, the songs that inspire their hearts.

We travel this road together.

As we gather in beloved community, let us open the holy havens of our hearts,
let us share the sacred places of our souls
for we are pilgrims who share a common path.

We travel this road together.

INTRO TO THE SERVICE - the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Our service today is a bit of a review, a looking back at who we have been and who we are - as a faith tradition. Just as each of you has been invited into a spiritual journey in this faith, we are collectively on a journey as well. When I began serving as a Director of Religious Education, we had only been a

merged faith for less than two generations, though each tradition had been forming for much longer. Unitarian Universalism was evolving, as it still is. We were especially concerned about developing in our children a Unitarian Universalist identity, much of which turned on their familiarity with our Principles - the values statements that Joel referenced in his March testimonial, the most recent of which were voted into being in 1985. The Sources of our wisdom were less familiar to most people by far, and the "Purposes" statement - that is, the Purpose of the Unitarian Universalist Association - was largely ignored. (*The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate power for religious, educational, and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions, and implement its principles.*) As educators, the coincidence of seven principles with seven colors of the rainbow was too good - too much to ignore . . . thus, everything was (and is) in rainbow colors, or put to a catchy tune so that they were more memorable. Often the Principles were translated into We Believe statements, which is not as they were intended for a non-creedal tradition but made it easier to teach. What also always struck me as curious was that we seemed to be ignoring the fact that these were not the first principles articulated by our merged traditions, nor were they intended to be the last!

Our children's versions went something like this:

[1st Principle](#): We believe that each and every person is important.

[2nd Principle](#): We believe that all people should be treated fairly and kindly.

[3rd Principle](#): We believe that we should accept one another and keep on learning together.

[4th Principle](#): We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.

[5th Principle](#): We believe that all persons should have a vote about the things that concern them.

[6th Principle](#): We believe in working for a peaceful, fair, and free world.

[7th Principle](#): We believe in caring for our planet Earth, the home we share with all living things.

HOW I REMEMBER THEM . . . Rose Gallogly, Coordinator of Religious Exploration

Doing religious education work here, at my home congregation, has given me no shortage of opportunities to reflect on Unitarian Universalism as I was taught to understand it growing up, compared to how I understand and try to teach it now. In the never-ending question (asked both by others and by myself) of, "what do you really believe?", referencing the seven principles was always the

natural baseline, the tangible thing to point to. I would love to say that I mean they infused my early life with deep theological meaning, but realistically it went more like: ‘ok yes, my church doesn’t have a single sacred text like yours might, but look! We still have something written down to guide us. That makes us real, right?’ It felt like the easiest part of this faith to explain to others, because the principles are, well, tangible and written down. It didn’t seem to matter that I usually only remembered the first and seventh principle, and often got a bit lost in the middle (I still do, honestly). The principles were something I could point to when the ‘realness’ of my church was questioned, and I really wanted confirmation that this was something real.

In all that emphasis on these tangible, written signposts of Unitarian Universalism — the songs we learned and the 7-color rainbows we colored in — I think sometimes my childhood RE lessons missed, or at least under-emphasized, the work of articulating our living tradition beyond the principles. I don’t remember learning about our 6 sources of faith, which could also have served as a tangible reference. I don’t even remember learning the history of how these principles came to be adopted, or that they were always meant to evolve over time. It strikes me now that in all of that lofty language, the word love — which we know to be really central to this faith — isn’t even used once in our existing principles.

In retrospect, I realize that I learned more about Unitarian Universalism by being a part of a community that prioritized taking care of one other and doing the work of justice in the world than I ever learned from the principles themselves. I believe now that the core of this faith is how we are together in community and in the world around us, and that our faith is dynamic and (hopefully) ever-changing, as it needs to be to be of service to real, messy humans as a grounding and guiding place in this ever more complicated world.

In religious exploration now, I still do teach about our principles, of course, and I hope they serve as guideposts as the children of this congregation grow into their own understanding of their faith. But I hope that I never make it seem like memorizing these 7 (or 8) phrases is the core of what it is to be UU. This is a living tradition in that it accepts the reality of change, and in that it must be *lived* — and the language we use to articulate our principles is just one tool out of many we might use to anchor and guide that living.

Reading *Melissa Harris-Perry is the Maya Angelou Presidential Chair in the Department of Politics and International Affairs and the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Wake Forest University, AND a lifelong Unitarian Universalist*
(from the Foreword to the Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide, 5th edition, 2012)

Unitarian Universalists have no set creed, but we do affirm seven shared Principles. If you join in fellowship with Unitarian Universalism, you can hold any opinion you want about the existence of a god

and what to call that god. You can change your opinion over time. You can follow your conscience, your readings, your thoughts, and your desires on issues like the existence of an afterlife, the idea of sin, the value of prayer, or the authority of religious texts. Among our congregations, you will find many different worship styles: raucous and religious, contemplative and nature-based, intellectual and secular. You can pray or not, sing in the choir or mumble the hymns, rush out after service or help brew the coffee, collect the canned goods or organize the field trip, pass out a petition or let the petition pass you by, dress casually for services or don your finest attire. Having set aside divisive doctrinal battles we seek a straightforward commitment to the fluid, open, collective work of seeking our truths together without assuming that we will all share the same truth.

Sound easy? It is not. But it is deeply rewarding. The seven Principles are simple to state but challenging to implement. Building a truly expansive intellectual, ethical, and cultural community is not for the faint of heart.

MEDITATION/PRAAYER

All That We Have Been, All That We Will Become

By [Leslie Ahuvah Fails](#)

All that we have been separately
and all that we will become together
is stretched out before and behind us
like stars scattered across a canvas of sky.
We stand at the precipice, arms locked
together like tandem skydivers
working up the courage to jump.
Tell me, friends:
What have we got to lose?
Our fear of failure?
Our mistrust of our own talents?
What have we got to lose?
A poverty of the spirit?
The lie that we are alone?
What wonders await us in the space
between the first leap
and the moment our feet, our wheels
however we move our bodies
across this precious earth

touch down softly on unknown soil?
What have we got to lose
that we can't replace with some
previously unimaginable joy?
Blessed are you, Spirit of Life
who has sustained us, enlivened us
and enabled us to reach this moment.*
Give us courage in our leaping,
and gratitude in our landing.

HOMILY the Rev. Anne Bancroft

I have no doubt mentioned to you that the first book I found at the local library about Unitarian Universalism was called *The Wind in Both Ears*, by Angus MacLean. It was actually the ONLY book I found in the local library about Unitarian Universalism! "My father sent me up from the root cellar to see about the wind," MacLean wrote. "He was rechecking the winter's potatoes to remove all signs of rot and was planning on setting out nets for some fresh cod later on. Was there a steady breeze, he wanted to know. Yes, there was. 'Now face it,' he said, 'so that the wind sings in both your ears. Then tell me where your nose points to.'" Robert Killan, who wrote the words on the book jacket, said that in this text, MacLean "urges a wondering which turns our faces to 'whatever is coming down the winds of time and circumstances, a continual checking of direction.'"

It was such a gentle and lovely invitation to an exciting idea - to a faith tradition that was continually responding to the world as we find it, responding to "the winds of time and circumstances." I had come out of the Episcopal church that has been repeating the same liturgy for hundreds and hundreds of years - which for many feels grounded and secure. For me it felt stuck, and I was drawn into this living tradition with all its quirks and uncertainties, though - as Melissa Harris-Perry shared with us, ". . . building a truly expansive intellectual, ethical, and cultural community is not for the faint of heart."

When we look back, those of us who have found both joy and challenge in this faith, we remember that both Unitarianism and Universalism grew up and out of the Christian faith, and both traditions offered words to frame their values. In 1880, the Rev. Charles Ames offered the Covenant that would carry Unitarianism well into the 20th century: *In the freedom of truth, and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man.* Those words were used at Theodore Parker Church well into the 20th century, as well. There is a plaque in the choir loft with the Ames Covenant printed on it in lovely gold leaf.

The Universalists landed on the Winchester profession in 1803, expanded by these 5 Conditions of Fellowship in 1899: *The Universal Fatherhood of God; the spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ; the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God; the certainty of just retribution for sin; the final harmony of all souls with God.*

The pattern of articulating a covenant along with stated values continued into the merger of both traditions in 1961 - and was written into Article II of our Association's by-laws, along with the agreement that the statements would be reviewed every 15 years. A new set was agreed to in 1974; and, in 1985, the expansion of the principles to include the list of six sources from which we draw wisdom: things like the "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder," "Wisdom from the world's religions," and "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science . . ." were voted into being. History tells us that by 1985, the Sources were a compromise, allowing mention of theology that is not apparent in the Principles themselves as we had moved even further away from our Christian roots. (Some of you remember, no doubt, the cross being taken down from the chancel area in our sanctuary, and the big blue panel of curtain that had rested behind it - faded around the image so that it remained even after the cross itself had been removed. I found that curtain in the Narthex, rolled up behind one of the old couches that used to be there, remnants of a theology no longer fitting well.)

We got a little relaxed about our time-line for checking on Article II and did not review the Principles and Sources again until the early 2000's. A revision came up for a vote at the General Assembly in 2009, losing by a slim margin. And now, begun in 2020, there is an **Article II Study Commission** in place that finally includes the orientation Rose referred to earlier. From their recent report: *The task at hand is to work together as Unitarian Universalists to craft an Article II that will enable our communities "to be a relevant and powerful force for spiritual and moral growth, healing, and justice," in the words of the Commission's charge, rooted in our broadest shared theological grounding: Love.*

You will see more about this endeavor over the next year or two, no doubt, with invitations to participate in the process. Wherever we find ourselves in our individual spiritual journeys - whatever joys we are celebrating, whatever sorrows we are healing from, whatever meaning we each derive from our living each and every day - we have a collective path that needs our attention. These seven statements we have covenanted to "affirm and promote" over the last 35 years may fall short of where we now see ourselves, or how we are responding to the world as we greet it in 2021.

In the last few years, for example, you may have heard about the 8th Principle Project, a grassroots endeavor to add a principle to the existing seven that would address issues of racism and bias. [We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote:](#)

journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

Many congregations have considered these words and voted them into their individual churches or fellowships. I have been aware of the encouragement to consider them and appreciate their having come up from within our tradition. My hope is that they get attention in the environment of our tradition as a whole - that the intention of being explicit about the work of antiracism, holding ourselves and our institutions accountable, is something we consider and commit to all together. To have principles that are articulated one way at this church, and another way at another church, feels to me like a splintering of our common identity, which is rooted in the collective decision-making of “We, the member congregations . . .”

And, I am hopeful there is a way in which the commitment to antiracism becomes an umbrella effort, as opposed to another in a list of statements. The work of antiracism and anti-oppression should pervade all our spiritual efforts.

This ongoing study and consideration and wrangling with the ideas and words that define us is such important work, finding the constructs to express who we are and what we find of ultimate importance to us. It feels a bit presumptuous, sometimes, to imagine that we mere humans are able to craft into words the values that direct our lives. Shouldn't some ancient marvel have passed them down to us, like the ten commandments, or the eight-fold paths?

But no - this is the freedom we claim, and this is our challenge. Not for the faint of heart.

MacLean ends his book this way, as good and humble a suggestion as any I could offer: “Let’s keep the wind singing in both ears, and pray for the courage to interpret and act upon what it brings to us.”

Yes, and I would add, let’s do it together. It’s pretty good advice for the only book in the library about our faith! I trust by now there are more.

Amen.

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Go your ways,
knowing not the answers to all things,
yet seeking always the answer
to one more thing than you know.

- John Brigham