

Our First Principle

Before we talk about our first principle let's take a quick look at how we came to have the 7 principles in the first place.

When the 2 denominations merged it was thought that some sort of basic statement was needed. It would have to please everyone from the deeply Christian among the Universalists to the fundamentalist atheists among the Unitarians. The merger nearly came apart over this statement, which in what would become typical fashion was entrusted to a committee for formulation. The statement that finally emerged and was adopted was as follows:

To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;

To cherish and spread universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;

To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships.

To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on the ideas of brotherhood, justice and peace.

To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.

Of course appended to the statement was a disclaimer making clear that this was not a statement of mandatory beliefs.

Now here is where it nearly came apart. The original committee proposal referred to "our Judeo Christian heritage." This wording warmly championed by many Universalists and as warmly opposed by many Unitarians. Changing "our" to "the" made the statement acceptable to the vast majority in both denominations. We have always known the power of words.

It was that same sensitivity to the power of language that led to the revised seven principles. As early as the late 1970's many, in particular many women, among UUs felt that the language of the statement was patriarchic and not inclusive enough. In 1977 Lucille Schuck Longview and a group of feminists from 1st Parish, Lexington, Mass. presented the Women and Religion Resolution to the UUA General Assembly. It called upon the UUA leadership and seminaries to put traditional language and assumptions in perspective in the future. This resolution passed. At the 1979 UU Continental Conference on Women in Religion a workshop entitled "UUA Principles, Do They Affirm Us As Women" strongly concluded that they did not. UUA President Gene Pickett gave

his strong support to the movement to change the Bylaws, Principles and Purposes.

Along with addressing sexism it was also proposed that language be found honoring traditions beyond the "Judeo Christian" (by the way many Jewish and Christian scholars have trouble with this term). Our 1981 General Assembly witnessed much vigorous debate over these proposals with no general agreement emerging, so of course, a committee was appointed. This committee submitted a draft proposal to the GA of 1983, which rejected it as "bloodless and bland". The next revision was submitted to the GA of 1984 and with minor revisions was adopted as in essence the current Principles and Sources. When published it was greeted by Time magazine with the famous "Deity Deleted" article, as no reference to God, or any form of deity occurs in either of its sections. In 1995 the most recent change was made when "the spiritual teachings of earth centered traditions" was added to the Sources. Today there are new calls for a through review of the document, which the original resolution stated should be conducted after 15 years, had passed.

So we see that our Principles are not commandments, or even sacred laws, we know they came out of discussion and debate and committee work. They have not been handed to us by a divine authority but by our denominational forbearers in General Assembly met. They are surely not written in stone, except perhaps in decorating some of our meetinghouses. They are instead an expression of the search of people of faith for principles around which to organize their personal and congregational witness in the world.

When the principles are recited short shrift is sometimes given to the statement which precedes them all "We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote..." In other words the principles are not simple statements of belief, they are meant to help guide us in our response to the world, to help congregations set goals for their internal life and external witness. We covenant not only to "affirm" but also to "promote" the principles.

The first of these principles is "the inherent worth and dignity of every person". It seems a short and simple statement yet there are worlds of meaning in those eight words. There is also much meaning in what is not in the statement.

Often in speaking with non-UUs I find that this principle can be the source of much confusion. Clearly the first principle draws on our humanist heritage as well as on the universal salvation tradition of Universalism. For those raised in traditional Western faiths this principle seems to challenge their concept of God. They see us as placing humanity on God's throne, of worshiping our own humanness. To a degree I can understand their feelings. Yet the principle makes no mention of God, one way or the other, and certainly does not equate humanity with divinity. It does not declare us to be God-like, which when you think about it Judaism, Christianity and Islam do..."created in his image". Nothing in the first principle declares us to be all knowing, all loving, all-powerful.

What it does do is to set guidelines for interactions between all people, and yes it does this in a very humanistic context.

"The inherent worth". Inherent is the key word here, we are called upon to value one another and ourselves not because we are "children of God" or "the chosen" or "the faithful. Our worth is not grounded in the benevolence of an outside force, nor does it derive from our upholding the true faith and following its rituals so as to achieve spiritual cleanliness. In truth neither does it derive from the fact that we are Americans (or any other nationality) or "whites" or "blacks", or blue eyed for that matter.

Instead worthiness is inherent in the simple fact of our humanity. No one is excluded.

Before developing this any further lets address one of the most common objections to it, what I call the "What About Hitler" question.

Well, what about Hitler? Does his reality negate the principle? No doubt Hitler proves that humans are capable of great evil, so do a lot of other people throughout our history. In our society Hitler has become the icon of evil, inferior only perhaps to Satan himself. Currently Osama bin Laden is running a close second. He incarnates human evil.

The principle however says nothing of good or evil, it speaks of worth and dignity. So can Hitler and his like be seen as possessing either worth or dignity? It is not an easy question, but the principle, let us remember, speaks of "inherent" worth and dignity. That which is inherent is born with the individual. Surely Hitler was not an evil baby? As a child would he not have had as much claim on guidance love and nurture as anyone else? Was there then any reason to see him as inhuman? Perhaps, if he had been raised in the spirit of the first principle, history would have been different, and perhaps not.

One of the hardest lessons of humanism is that humanity has the capacity for both good and evil, indeed that those terms really have no meaning outside of a human context. The universe, the planet do not commit acts of benevolence or malevolence, they simply are. We provide the only framework for morality. The first principle in no way contradicts this. What it does say is that we are born worthy and with dignity, it provides no guarantee that each of us will always choose to manifest those traits.

Remember, too, that the preamble states that we not only "affirm" but also "promote" these values. In this is the realization that they need to be promoted, that we have an obligation to create conditions in which we all can flourish in worth and dignity. None of this excuses evil doing. Indeed in seeking to promote the first principle we may well be called upon to resist and admonish, even correct, those who undermine or flout it. We may not be able to protect our own and others worth and dignity without acting against those who harm others.

What the principle does remind us is that in dealing with those who oppose us or

who we oppose on moral grounds, we must remain true to the fact of their inherent worth and dignity. Does this mean we forgive any and everything? I think not, nor do I regard this as the main question. What is significant here is that a very important component of worth and dignity is that it imposes responsibility.

No one can maintain their own worth and dignity without accepting responsibility for their own actions, nor can they maintain them by denying the worth and dignity of others by word or deed. So while worth and dignity are indeed inherent, they are subject to corrosion by actions. Holding people responsible for their actions is perfectly consistent with the principle. Indeed accepting responsibility and taking corrective action is the pathway to restoring worth and dignity.

Of course Hitler, Bin Laden etc. are extreme cases. How does the first principle play out in daily living? What does it mean to acknowledge that everyone has inherent worth and dignity?

As I have already mentioned it means no one can be placed outside of the human community. We cannot justify regarding anyone as "the other". The first principle can be seen as related to the statement in our Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights". The principle goes even further in that it does not speak of an endowment from a Creator, but of inherency.

I stated earlier that it is important to realize what the first principle does not say as well as what it does say. We have already seen that it does not say that we are inherently good or evil. Well, unlike the Declaration it does not say that we are created equal either. This is important as "equal is a tricky concept. Clearly we are not created equal in terms of intelligence, physical beauty, health, bodily strength, athletic ability and so forth. These are inequalities of nature, some but not all of them can be acted upon, some must simply be accepted. There are also social inequalities, wealth, position, legal rights and protections. Most of these are subject to action, often with great exertion required.

What the first principle tells us is that none of these, in and of themselves, should make anyone less worthy as a human being. It challenges us to address inequalities that fly in the face of the principle, where and when we can do so. This is the "promote" part of the preamble. It admonishes us not to use any real or perceived inequality or difference to set up hierarchies of worth. Asians are not more/less human than Africans, Women are not more worthy than Men, the poor are not more or less human than the rich. We may affirm Darwinism but not social Darwinism. In biblical terms we cannot dehumanize the lepers.

This idea can have huge implications for society in terms of social policy, criminal justice, and warfare among other matters. It does not forbid the taking of protective measures, for example removing sex offenders from contact with their potential victims. It does call on us to treat those individuals as human, to try

and understand what drives them, to seek ways of helping them and to find the most humane possible ways to deal with them while not condoning or permitting their activities. In short the first principle calls us to always act as compassionately as we possibly can, even while taking firm action where needed.

Even when the Principles were first adopted there were those who felt the need to parse the first principle in ways that would de-emphasize the individual and elevate the collective. This has been an ongoing debate within the denomination for a very long time. For myself, I believe that an excessive devotion to either individualism or communalism can be dangerous. I also believe the two concepts are necessary and complimentary to each other and that this is important to the living of the first principle. If there is worth and dignity inherent in every individual, then the communities of individuals must share in that worth and dignity. If a community is to be one of worth and dignity it must recognize the value of each individual member. In turn each individual must interact within the community in ways that affirm and promote the worth and dignity of all other members and the community itself or risk eroding their personal worth and dignity. Indeed it is the recognition by each and all of the worth and dignity of each and all that create responsible communal life. I would however take the position that worth and dignity are inherent in the individual and the community derives its worth and dignity from the actions of its members. Still it is a matter of balance. Communities should exist as vehicles to promote the growth of all, to create possibilities for human expression. Individuals and communities must also be vigilant to guard against tyranny. Both of the individual against the many and of the many against the few or the one. Fundamentally, a community rooted in the first principle would be one that promoted the well being of one and all and in which each promoted the well being also of one and all. Of course this is much easier said than done.

In part this may stem from a misunderstanding of the "worth" part of the principle. Being worthy is not the same as being powerful or privileged. Our worth is not to be measured in terms of advantages over others, and our dignity is only harmed if we impose ourselves on another. We do not gain by others' loss; at least we do not worthily gain. By the same token a society's worth is not measured by its power over its members, and certainly not by its power over non-members. Instead its worth and dignity are rooted in the opportunities it creates for members and even non-members. Once again this is the "promote" imperative at work.

"Every person" is also a key phrase. As a species we are very good at separating ourselves into groups, into "us" and "them" or "U" and "Not U" in British terminology.

We should remember this when we are tempted to label people as "UU" and "Not UU". We base these divisions on some real or perceived difference. I am for example an "American", a "Unitarian-Universalist", a "Sanderson", a "white", a "Man", a "Baby Boomer" a "Virginian", a "native New Yorker" etc. Often we act

as though these divisions reflect something fundamental, but none of them really are. For example if I am classified as "white" I am part of a group that includes white men and women, but not black men or women. On the other hand if I am classified as a "man", I am now part of a group, which includes black men but excludes white women. I am an "American", yet if my parents had remained in England 6 months longer than they did, I would have been born British. Even some seemingly exclusive categories like "male" or "female" now seem to have permeable boundaries. All of this is important in realizing the significance of "every person". Our humanity is the only characteristic that is universal, and the only one that we remain a part of no matter the criteria. It is the one category to which "every person" belongs.

This does not mean that the goal of the first principle is "sameness". Through valuing "every person" we embrace the different gifts each person has to offer. It would be absurd to argue that our differences have no impact or meaning. Everything we experience helps to shape us. Perceived and real differences certainly have an impact on what we experience and how we experience life.

No one would doubt that men and women have some different experiences in life due to their sex, it seems equally true that there are significant ways that men and women (speaking in general terms) react and relate to events, experiences and people. Similarly it is different to grow up African American or Native American. English speakers do have some different concepts and assumptions than Mandarin speakers. Farmers see the world somewhat differently than factory workers. One could go on and on.

The first principle reminds us that each of these is a human perspective, all rooted in human experiences and that each is worthy. We should not deny or fear these differences but recognize them and use them to advantage. Everyone has something to contribute. "Every person" again means no one is to be disregarded, no one perspective seen as normative. Our differences do to greater or lesser extent shape what each of us brings to the table, but the important thing is that we all come to the same table and share.

Our first principle leads to a vision of a world that would be incredibly rich, where everyone would be valued and would value everyone else, where every perspective would be heard. It could lead us to a world where our primary identity would be "human being" A world where everyone accepted responsibility for his or her actions and responsibility for one another's well being. Such would be the world that would "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person"