

ACTING ON OUR FIRST PRINCIPLE or  
PUTTING OUR MONEY WHERE OUR MOUTH IS

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Sept. 14, 2008

There's a popular misconception out there that Unitarian Universalists are so openminded and inclusive that they might as well not hold any common beliefs at all, that if you're a UU, you can believe anything you want.

Well, not exactly. We are openminded, pluralistic, accepting of others' spiritual paths. But we do have beliefs in common. They are principles of behavior toward each other and the universe, which we consider essential and very practical if the world is to be improved.

I remember a moment in my Worship and Liturgy class in a liberal Protestant seminary several years ago, when a fellow student, after reading our Principles for the first time, said, "Gee, these are nice, but are they religious?" His experience was with creeds such as the Nicæan or Apostles Creed, recited in many mainline denominations every Sunday.

My UU student colleagues and I tried to point out that how we treat each other and the universe are certainly religious principles; they're just not stated in Biblical language. I'm not sure he was convinced, but we were!

In our time together on Sundays during this church year we are examining the principles of Unitarian Universalism, looking at how we live our lives in accordance with those principles, and considering how we might use them in our outreach to the larger community. In other words, putting our money and our energy where our principles are.

In these first couple of months, we've been thinking about our First Principle: that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In philosophy, a first principle is a basic, foundational proposition or assumption that cannot be deduced from any other proposition or assumption. In a formal logical system, or in other words, a set of propositions that are consistent with one another, it is probable that some of the statements can be deduced from one another. In a famous example, "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal" the last claim can be deduced from the former two.

A first principle is one that cannot be deduced from any other. In mathematics, the classic example is that of Euclid's geometry; its hundreds of propositions can be deduced from a set of definitions, postulates, and common notions: all three of which constitute "first principles."

Aristotle formulated a definition of first principle which expressed the essentialness of consistency in western thought. A first principle cannot be doubted, as all doubting is based on inconsistency.

Profoundly influenced by the mathematician Euclid, Descartes, the "father of modern philosophy", invented the foundationalist system of philosophy. He used the "method of doubt" to systematically doubt everything he could possibly doubt, until he was left with what he saw as purely indubitable truths.

Using these self-evident propositions as his "axioms", or "foundations", he went on to deduce his entire body of knowledge from them. His most famous proposition is "I think, therefore I am", or "Cogito ergo sum".

Thirteenth century theologian John Duns Scotus brought Christianity's First Principle to bear on philosophy, writing "A Treatise On God As First Principle" which is about the First Cause, or the Prime Mover, a force which is eternal, and exists, prior to the order of beings, and prior to creation.

In religion, a first principle is based on what is considered to be basic Reality. For most of the religious world, that basic Reality is God. For Buddhists, however, it is the Reality of the existing world. For Unitarian Universalists, that Reality is the essence of life, the Spirit of Life, the life that resides in all beings, animate and inanimate.

When we consider our First Principle, we see it as a starting point, as other religions consider God to be a starting point. To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person means that we believe that each person was born with the qualities of worthiness, integrity, goodness, and beauty and that each person has an innate dignity which merits respect. For us, this is inarguable.

Some of us call it God or the Spirit of Life, some of us call it the Mystery, some don't give it any name at all because it can't be expressed for them in others' words, but we do see the expression of life in every person and, for some by extension, in all beings. For this reason, we believe our religious mission is to offer acceptance and love to all persons, honoring their inherent worth and dignity.

Our belief in our First Principle has often gotten us into trouble. We have sometimes been civilly disobedient in upholding our First Principle. We have opposed slavery, marched for civil rights for oppressed groups, resisted arrest when protesting wars and inhumane acts, supported agencies like the ACLU which insist on equal protections for all.

The problem with First Principles, sometimes, is that others don't agree with them! Sometimes laws have been written which override human worth and dignity. Yet we have made progress in this area by consistently opposing inhumane laws and practices in society.

How do we define worth? and dignity? And why is this recognition foundational to Unitarian Universalism?

To answer this question, I believe it's important to think about the several Sources of Unitarian Universalism, which are rich and varied and set us apart as a religion from most traditional belief systems.

We value direct personal spiritual experience; we draw on the words and deeds of our spiritual ancestors; we find wisdom in the world's religions; we have a strong Jewish and Christian heritage which calls us to respond to the force of love in our lives; we have a rational approach to religion which comes from our Humanist forebears; we use science as a touchstone for determining reality and we use the creative arts as an expression of our sense of reality.

Because of these several sources, we do not have a creed we must all subscribe to. But we do find that our values, both personal and communal, are very similar. And because of our Sources, we have come to understand that human worth and dignity is so basic for us that it undergirds everything we hold dear. It is the keystone of the universe for us, the essence of life.

Many other religious traditions disagree with us. They consider God to be their Ultimate Reality, their First Principle, the Holy of Holies. But because, for us, God is such a hard and personal and mysterious thing to define satisfactorily in a communal way, we choose to find that Holy of Holies in each expression of Life. We consider the innate worth and dignity of every human being to be the essence of life, to be the expression of the ultimate reality of the universe as we understand it today.

We could be wrong. But, using our understandings of how scientific inquiry works, we are willing to rethink our beliefs and values in the light of new information, which is another way we differ from other faith traditions.

What does it feel like to be respected for our inherent worth and dignity? What has that experience been for you? (cong resp)

What does it feel like to be disrespected, even oppressed, because your worth and dignity is not recognized? (cong resp)

As members of our current American culture and society, we see every day instances of respect and disrespect for human worth and dignity.

We see people who have fewer civil rights because of their sexual orientation or gender identification; we see prisoners detained unfairly and perhaps mistreated or even tortured; we see racial profiling, housing difficulties, religious intolerance. We see our returning vets' medical and psychological needs ignored and denied. We see people losing jobs because they are obese or aged or disabled. We see children missing out on education because of poverty or developmental differences. We see cruelty toward those who are different and we see indifference toward that cruelty.

Some of these things may have happened to us and we have needed a champion, we have needed compassion, we have needed justice. And who has been there for us? Who is there now for those who need a champion, who need compassion, who need justice?

What have we as individuals done to fulfill this need? What have we done to offer compassion and justice to those whose worth and dignity has been compromised and trampled?

And what have we as a congregation done so far to fulfill this need? What programs have we undertaken to offer compassion and justice to those whose worth and dignity has been compromised and trampled?

I think of the study we undertook a few years ago which resulted in our being recognized as an official Welcoming Congregation, a faith community which has learned a great deal about the issues of homophobia and the challenges of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons in our communities.

We have supported the cause for marriage equality and for anti-discrimination legislation; both of these causes have made enormous progress in our state, helping sexual minorities achieve greater civil rights.

I think of our Peace and Justice group, which works to bring peaceful solutions to our wartorn world, protesting torture and taking stands for non-violent actions.

I think of our financial contributions to local and national funds which support people in desperate circumstances from poverty or natural disaster.

I think of the recently proposed idea of a Social Responsibility Council here at UUCWI, to encourage efforts to address many issues of worth and dignity, among them immigration, health care, and poverty.

Clearly there is a great deal we can do. We have already undertaken some things. We want to do more and we will do more.

Though our first principle is the foundation of our faith community, we have to admit that there are questions and contradictions within it. Some of us who have moved away from Christianity but have not yet resolved painful early experiences, find it hard to understand that UUs can be Christian. These folks are sometimes uncomfortable with references to Jesus, God, or the Bible.

Some of us are uncomfortable with politically conservative persons and may even discourage them from participating in our congregations. But we need to examine our thoughts and actions in light of our first principle. We wonder, "how can we love our neighbor when he plans to vote for That Person? How can we tolerate That Language or That Idea when it is so repugnant to us personally? How can we welcome both Pro-Life and Pro-Choice advocates within these walls?"

We return to our first principle for the determination we need to address these sticky issues. One of our earliest spiritual ancestors, Francis David, wrote: "We need not think alike to love alike." Our religious faith asks us to be deeply respectful of others, even when we do not accept their values or theological perspectives.

On the other hand, in the name of radical respect, sometimes we find ourselves being foolishly tolerant of individual behavior that is destructive to the community. Tolerance of harmful behavior is not consistent with our first principle for it is in violation of the law of love and respect for the health of the community. A violator still has inherent worth and dignity but harmful behavior is not allowed, nevertheless.

In one of our district's largest congregations, First Unitarian in Portland awhile back, a known date rapist began to visit the church and to prey upon unsuspecting women during coffee hour. Women were warned privately to stay away from this man, but nobody questioned his right to be there.

My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, decided to act. She writes, "Our church is private property and anyone who comes there to harm others loses his privilege of fellowship with us, to my way of thinking. I asked several of our largest men to surround him and give him the following message:

'We know why you are here. We want you to leave and never come back. If you do, we will call the police.'

Some people questioned her action as heavy-handed, for he had committed no crime on the premises. But Rev. Sewell is quick to answer: "Yes, this man has worth and dignity---and no, it doesn't follow that we should tolerate his harmful behavior."

Being true to our First Principle means that we strive to be in right relationship with others. We strive to be respectful even when we disagree with the views and behavior of another. We strive to be gentle and to offer forgiveness and the understanding that redemption is always available.

Our First Principle calls us to leave the safety of our own comfort zone and stand against hunger and injustice in the world. It calls us to examine our own thoughts and actions in light of our understanding that all beings have worth and dignity. It calls us to reach out into our surroundings and build bridges between ourselves and those who are different from us. It calls us to be compassionate even when angry and hurt.

Our First Principle serves as the foundation for our remaining principles which are derived and deduced from it, principles which call us to be compassionate and just, which call us to accept one another and encourage each other's spiritual growth. Our First Principle assures us that we have the right to follow our own conscience in a search for truth and meaning.

Our First Principle assures us that the democratic process, which is based on the conscience of each person, will give us fair and equitable outcomes. Our First Principle underlies our desire for world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

And our First Principle makes it clear that not only is our own human worth and dignity invaluable but that the worth and dignity of all creation is precious and that we are interdependent within that creation.

In recent months and years, terrible cruel acts have been perpetrated upon innocent human beings---murders, bombings, abuse, and other violence.

In response to these acts, some victims and their relatives have sought revenge and retribution, so devastated are they by the violence that they can feel nothing but anger and hate, perhaps because they have been wounded many times in the past and have not experienced the compassion they themselves deserve.

But notably, very often in the aftermath of these events, there are other voices---voices of compassion for those who love the perpetrator, voices expressing a desire to understand why the offender might have become so twisted as to lash out, voices expressing hope and intention to pursue solutions to the underlying problems of desperate people, so that these kinds of events might be averted early.

And many times, there is forgiveness offered---a compassion for the tortured life of the offender, an understanding that this person too has worth and dignity and that healing of this person's self is more important than revenge.

Our First Principle calls us to respond in healing ways as best we can. We will not always be able to reach this highest goal right away, yet strive we can for understanding and compassion, for forgiveness if not forgetting, for healing instead of additional hurt.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn # 131, Love Will Guide Us

Announcements--Joann

BENEDICTION: (Please reach out to your neighbor, holding hands or touching someone's shoulder, and let's close our service by affirming the joy of our community.)

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our First Principle, our foundational belief, is that human life is inherently worthy and deserving of respect. May we strive to live that belief in our everyday lives and may we as a congregation commit ourselves to reaching out in our community to act on that belief. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.