

THE HOUSE WE ALL BUILT TOGETHER

by the Rev. Kit Ketcham

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During this church year, we are addressing, one by one, the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism because we have so many new folks coming through our doors. In August and September, we considered our First and Founding Principle, which states that we member congregations of the UUA do affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We do not have a creed that all must believe. Instead, we uphold certain values which we believe make human life more responsible and more satisfying.

I've spoken with you several times now this fall about how our First Principle shapes us as a religious community, founded as we are upon the premise that each life is precious and good, that though we may not always do good things, we still were born with inherent worth and dignity. It is a challenge to offer respect sometimes someone because of behavior, but it is our commitment to do so which reflects our own inherent worth and dignity.

Because our national elections are coming up in the next few weeks, we have chosen to address our Fifth Principle during this season, the principle which states that "we affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations and society."

Now why would a religious community enshrine the democratic process? How is democracy a religious issue? And what does the right of conscience have to do with how a religious community is governed?

As the Rev. Ken Collier has written in his book "Our Seven Principles", there is more to democracy than a simple counting of noses (in a vote). Sometimes the majority is wrong about an issue. Think of how often slavery and oppression of minority groups has been the law of the land, voted in by a majority vote.

This is not usually true democracy, because in most elections only a fraction of the population actually votes, so a vote is often not representative of the people. And without every voice, it's difficult to make the best decisions.

The idea of self-rule or democracy is based on a religious idea: that people should rule themselves because no one is privileged above another. This is in accordance with our First Principle, affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. If each person is equally worthy, then no one is more worthy than another.

Therefore, it follows that each person in the community is equally responsible with others in the community for the wellbeing of the community. All responsible persons participate in governing and democracy is the best way we know to accomplish this. A successful democracy depends upon the consciences of the individuals who are part of the governing process.

Our conscience is our inner moral plumbline, the deepest values in our hearts, which spring from our own inherent worth and dignity. When we override our conscience or ignore the twinges it gives us when we do the wrong thing, we must deal with the discomfort and the consequences of acting against our conscience. Our conscience is the "still small voice" within us that guides our actions.

Conscience is not the voice of conventional morality. It is the voice that connects us with the worth of all things. It is the deeper voice of the spirit of life, of the earth and sun and stars. We depend on it for peace of mind. Without our conscience, we are rudderless, adrift and susceptible to the influence of less-worthy impulses. This is the role of conscience in our religious life as Unitarian Universalists. (PAUSE)

In the past weeks as I was thinking with Toyon and Terra who helped me with this service, we realized that the children's story today is a metaphor for how our Fifth Principle, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, was invoked as we built this structure together.

In the story there's a village of people who have very few resources. A stranger comes to the village and asks for food. The villagers have very little food for themselves and are afraid they will not be able to feed this person as well as their own families.

"No problem," says the stranger. "I can make soup out of a stone." And the story is about he does it and what the villagers are able to create together.

In my mind, the village is this congregation when it began to be clear to some folks in leadership that the community would not grow stronger and more effective in the cramped surroundings of a rented space.

Who were those folks in leadership at that time? Who was on the board or committees at the time that the idea of building a church arose? Please stand. (I am going to give you many chances to stand in the next few minutes---please don't feel you have to stand if you are uncomfortable doing so.)

Who was the stranger who needed sustenance? If you came to this congregation during those early years wanting religious education for your kids but finding it hard to get them to church at 4 pm, if you just couldn't manage an afternoon service or the cramped surroundings, or if you came and hung on hoping for a new day, please stand.

And who were the folks in the congregation who were scared of how huge and overwhelming this project might be? I suspect that might have been most of us, at one time or another. Please stand.

And what was the stone that provided the base for the soup, for the building project? In my thinking, at least, it was the dream, the idea, the possibility, that UUCWI could become more than it was at that time, with a space we could offer to the community at large, where we could have classes and worship and concerts and art and be seen as a vibrant contributor to Whidbey Island life. Who all had the idea, who were the dreamers? Please stand.

Where did the soup pot come from? In our congregation's metaphorical soup, the pot would be the land, the spot of ground that has become the foundation for this building, that holds close the soil and timbers and concrete that hold this structure in its firm and gentle grip. Who provided the pot for our soup? Who had a hand in providing or caring for the land on which we built? Please stand.

Underneath the pot of soup, there is always a heat source. Heat is energy. Who supplied the energy for our soup, our building? Did you come to meetings at which plans were discussed and voted on? Did you serve on one of the planning committees? Did you write a newsletter article? Did you invite people to catch the excitement? Then you provided the energy that began to heat up the soup. Please stand up.

Who provided the water? For without the broth, the stock, the liquid capital, there is no soup. Every person who contributed money, to the building fund helped provide the water without which there would be no soup. Will you please stand up.

Now, onions are a particularly important part of a soup. They give a different flavor from everything else. In our soup, our building process, they would be the ones who had questions, who challenged decisions, who felt it very important to consider every aspect of the building process carefully.

Some of these folks were very much against the project, even though they love this community; they believed that our money was better spent elsewhere. They exercised their right of conscience to speak their minds and in so doing, improved the process of decision-making and action.

Sometimes onions make us cry, at least temporarily, but once they're in the soup, they bring important flavor. And the onions in our soup insisted that we put greens in there too! They insisted that our building be environmentally friendly and economically feasible. And their desires were respected and included as much as possible. Who brought the onions to our soup? We appreciate what they did to make this soup so flavorful. Please stand.

Carrots are an ingredient that bring color into the soup. In our building, a lot of people were helpful in figuring out the colors that would be the best and most beautiful and most practical. Who were the carrot-bringers here at UUCWI? the ones who helped make aesthetic decisions? Please stand

A good soup has to have protein as well. That protein can come in the form of meat or beans or tofu, but to carry a hungry person through to their next meal, the soup has got to have good solid protein. In our building, what would be the protein? I think protein is the heart of the soup; what is the heart of our building? Who did the work, from the earliest days to the present time and beyond? Who put their heart and soul into the construction of this sacred space? If you did any of the work, please stand.

What about the pepper and salt and other spices and herbs? Soup is pretty bland without these ingredients. We could have had a bland building too, but some people kept having ideas about what it should look like and how we might use it. If you had ideas about the building and offered them, even if they weren't used in the final product, you have supplied the spices. Please stand.

Most soups have some kind of carbohydrate like barley or rice or potatoes. These things are often added toward the end of the cooking process and they represent the folks who were new and came to be part of the project during this past year. If you came and were part of our process during the past year, even if you only did a little or contributed some money, you are part of this building too. Please stand.

Well, the soup is finished, all ready to be eaten! But somebody has set the table for us, placing the chairs just so, providing a beautiful table and cloth and candles and flowers for our enjoyment and use. Who prepared this space to be so beautiful? Who polished and varnished and dusted and washed, so that our sanctuary and our rooms would be so attractive? Who is carefully making sure that we have art on our walls and that we keep our space beautiful? Please stand.

I notice that practically everyone here has stood up at least once. That's democracy, where every person is represented in some way. But hang on, we have a couple more things to think about!

Now, who is enjoying the soup? Who is enjoying the building that we all together have created? Who is part of the community which has built this building? If you are here today, you are part of this community. We built this building for you, as well as for ourselves.

We built it for our visitors, for our members, for our children, for our elders, and for those whose ideas and love contributed so much but who died before the building was complete. We built it for you who are here today and for those who cannot be here.

Democracy is a messy thing. We had problems arise during the building of our dream home. We didn't agree on everything. Sometimes tempers got short. Sometimes people got really tired. Sometimes people had to quit the job they were working on and go do something else for awhile. But we went ahead, despite the problems. We rose above the little stuff and worked out as much of the big stuff as we could.

We depended on our consciences to make good choices. When we were angry about something, we tried to listen to that still small voice that said "this is a community worth being part of. try to work out the bugs." We learned---and we continue to learn every day---that all the voices count, even when we don't agree with them.

We kept going, even when it seemed like the project would never end, like the obstacles would never be overcome, like not enough people were showing up to do the work. We were frustrated sometimes by how much there was to do and by the things that went wrong.

But our dreamers and our doers kept us going. There was too big a reward at the end of the project and they wouldn't let us quit----the reward was a metaphorical pot of soup that will nourish us and our community for many years to come.

That's democracy for you. It's tenacious, it's messy, it's imperfect. It's a human system! But it worked and here we are. This meeting house, this sanctuary, these classrooms were built democratically and in accordance with our religious principles and values.

There's a story in our American history books about a Revolutionary War soldier, a Mr. Ames, who, upon seeing the tall three-masted sailing ships of the British empire, observed that there was an important difference between monarchy, in which a hereditary ruler calls all the shots, and a democracy, where the ordinary people govern.

Mr. Ames allowed as how a monarchy was like those big impressive ships and a democracy was like a raft of logs lashed together. The one is beautiful and majestic under sail upon the high seas, but in rough weather can be shattered and sunk against the rocks. The raft of democracy, on the other hand, is virtually unsinkable, but you always have your feet wet.

So---literally and figuratively, we're in the soup together and a tasty concoction it is. We all had a hand in creating it, we each contributed our own particular ingredient or offering to the mix.

And the final question is: who is keeping the soup a cooking? Who is tending the fire, bringing the beauty, tending the land, savoring the community? It seems to me that that's our privilege and responsibility as part of the community which eats the soup.

Every person here has an opportunity to stir the soup, to keep it simmering, to participate in many ways, whether that's ushering or refreshments or helping with religious education or paying a pledge or serving on a committee or attending a gathering or contributing an auction item or picking up litter on the highway or bringing food for Good Cheer.

Because that's what keeps the soup nourishing and plenteous---the willingness of all to stay involved, to give whatever they can to make UUCWI the thriving, giving, loving community it can be. What will your part be? I hope you'll think about what you can do to stir the soup and keep it a-cookin'!

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

CLOSING HYMN: What a Joy, this Habitation (words in O/S, tune Ode to Joy)

BENEDICTION: 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 each of us has contributed in our own way to the creation of this sacred space. May we remember the responsibilities of democracy, may we heed our conscience, and may we live out our ideals as we begin life in this our new home. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.