

The Sources of Unitarian Universalism
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Years ago, a friend of mine was studying psychology. She intended to become a clinical psychologist. One day, we were talking about psychology, and she asked me if I had ever thought about becoming a therapist. “Oh, no! I would *never* do that,” I said. “Therapists have to be quiet too often; clients get to do most of the talking.” ;)

Yes, ministry does tend to attract opinionated people. However, it does not take too many years in ministry to realize that, for the wellbeing of the congregation, ministers often keep their strongest opinions to themselves or at least they moderate the opinions that they share from the pulpit. Why? Most often, their intention is to help as many congregants as possible to feel welcome, as well as to avoid fanning any flames of polarization in the congregation.

This morning, however, I am going to allow my opinionated self a chance to come out and play. All work and no play make Jack a dull boy. All discretion and no disclosure make Rev. Ann a dull girl. I have an opinion about the six Sources of the living Unitarian Universalist tradition. I have an opinion about the seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. I have an opinion about the draft revision of Article II of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association by the Commission on Appraisal. The draft revision is an insert in the Order of Service.

My hope is not necessarily that you will come to agree with me but that you will become equally opinionated – opinionated enough to participate in the revision process. The Commission on Appraisal is gathering comments on the revision through October 16. Further deliberation will take place next June at the annual General Assembly in Salt Lake City.

I will be blunt. I am lukewarm at best regarding the seven Principles of our tradition. It surprises me when Unitarian Universalists assume that the seven Principles are robust enough to be the centerpiece of a religious tradition. They are not. On the other hand, I am truly, madly,

deeply in love with the six Sources of our living tradition. If you would like to follow along, the Sources and the Principles are found in the front of the hymnal.

The six Sources are: Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life; words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love; wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings, [in particular] which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; and 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. If your hymnal does not show that last Source, that is because it was added in 1995. The other Sources date to 1984.

I agree with the Rev. Jason Shelton, who says, "Most of our folks can talk about the Principles in glowing terms, but they're a statement of covenant among congregations and how we will be in the world. The statement about what we *believe* [emphasis added] is a statement about diversity, and that's the Sources . . . Instead of watering everything down to the theological least common denominator, we need to be in integrity with each of our Sources – not watering down Christianity so the humanist feels comfortable with it, or watering down humanism so the pagans feel comfortable with it."¹

I love Unitarian Universalism because of the range of this collection of Sources. No other tradition has this range. I appreciate these Sources because they have enough depth to remain fresh for a lifetime. There is no expiration date on these Sources. There is no "best if used by" date on them. I have to say that I am disappointed in the draft revision. The draft revision dilutes the power and comprehensiveness of the current Sources language.

¹ "The Sources Sing" by Kimberly French, *UU World*, Summer 2008, page 34, or go to this website: <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/108002.shtml>.

What is not to like about the Principles (especially the first and the seventh Principles, which are favorites of many people)? The first Principle that congregations covenant to affirm and promote is the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” About two years ago, William Schulz, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the current Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, delivered an address entitled “What Torture’s Taught Me.”

Among other things, William Schulz said, “Our traditional doctrines of human nature rest uneasy in a world full of torturers. In what sense can we defend the notion that a torturer is a person of “*inherent* worth and dignity?”² I cannot defend the notion. I do not know whether worth and dignity *inhere* in human beings.³ We *choose* to treat people with dignity.

The seventh Principle that congregations covenant to affirm and promote is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I am not the first to note that spider webs exist as a way to trap tasty morsels of food. A web is a weapon.⁴ Also, the typical web exists on a plane; it is flat. There is no hierarchy of wholeness, not even a healthy hierarchy (in contrast to a “dominator hierarchy”). The philosopher Ken Wilber might call something like this “flatland.” I do not see myself as part of a “web” of existence. The “web” metaphor is not sophisticated enough to point to the nature of existence.

By now, you might be thinking that I am dissecting words and phrases in the manner of a cranky English teacher or a cranky theologian. I take language seriously because it shapes perception. I love Unitarian Universalism too much to have popular words and phrases become some sort of litmus test for determining who is “with the program” and who is not.

Now that you have heard about my uneasiness with the first and seventh Principles, perhaps you can understand why I am loath to ask any congregation to recite any particular set of words, week in and week out. For example, I do not relate to “faith.” Sometimes this congregation is

² See <http://www.uuma.org/berrystreet/Essays/BSE2006.htm>.

³ The Rev. Dan Harper posted words to this effect on the blog of someone else at some point in the past. I no longer have the citation.

⁴ I recall that the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, said something like this during my seminary years there.

asked to recite an “Affirmation of Faith.” If the minister chokes on a word, what about the response of a visitor or a newer member? Any “living tradition” calls for *discussion* of words and phrases, not *recitation* of words and phrases. Discussion allows new insights to emerge and allows newcomers in a congregation to creatively participate in congregational life instead of toeing a line, even a very beautiful line.

Speaking of cranky English teachers and cranky theologians, I want to introduce you to Mr. Crankypants, in case you have not yet had the pleasure of his acquaintance. Mr. Crankypants is the alter ego of the Rev. Dan Harper, a Unitarian Universalist minister. Rev. Dan has a blog called “Yet Another Unitarian Universalist.”

Every once in a while Mr. Crankypants elbows Rev. Dan out of the way and writes a message on the blog. Two years ago, around the time that word of the Commission on Appraisal’s review of Article II was starting to get around, Mr. Crankypants elbowed Rev. Dan out of the way and wrote a blog entry entitled “If they made Mr. C. king of the universe...” All by himself, Mr. Crankypants rewrote Article II, and this version of Article II remains my favorite version. He wrote:

“Knowing that no words shall ever be used as a creed among us, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association do enter into covenant together to uphold these religious principles:

That every person is worthy of love; and therefore we shall treat each other, and all human beings, with justice tempered by love and compassion;

That we shall remain religious seekers all our lives, acknowledging that as individuals we are finite beings with limited understanding; and therefore we acknowledge that we must remain responsive to the insights of other human beings, particularly those within our covenanted religious community;

That we shall depend on love, reason, and liberty in the day-to-day and year-to-year running of our religious communities, making them an example to the world of the best in human communities;

That we shall promote openness, fairness, and honesty in our own communities and in all human interactions, living out the highest democratic principles to the end that we shall resist authoritarianism wherever it springs up;

That we shall extend morality and our love to all living beings and Earth's entire biosphere.”
Mr. Crankypants continued:

“Ongoing revelation continually opens new insights to humanity. We acknowledge the beauty and insights present in all great world religious traditions; we recognize that as a religious movement we are rooted in the Western religious traditions, though individuals among us may be rooted in other traditions; and we recognize our responsibility to re-interpret Western religious traditions in light of the lives we live in the present.

As free, but mutually interdependent, congregations, we enter into this covenant; we promise to one another our mutual trust and support; and should we break this covenant with other congregations, we shall accept the guidance of, and appropriate discipline by, other congregations within this covenant.”⁵

In a very recent blog entry, Mr. Crankypants even grades the draft revision of Article II as if it were a term paper.⁶ In a few days, this homily will be posted on the congregation's website, and I will include a link to his blog entries. My fervent hope is that you will look at the draft revision of Article II, that you will follow the instructions on the back of the Order of Service to compare it with the original version, and that you will give the Commission on Appraisal the feedback that they are seeking.

⁵ See <http://www.danielharper.org/blog/?p=517>.

⁶ See <http://www.danielharper.org/blog/?p=1502>.

Before I close, there is something else that I would like to highlight in the draft revision of Article II. In the current version of Article II, there is no “explanation” after each Principle. Each “explanation” is something new.

I share the concern of the Rev. Sean Denison, who writes, “The didactic explanations of each principle are a terrible idea. We already see the principles used in a way that is quasi-creedal. By adding institutional explanation of what each principle ‘really means’ we move toward the creation of orthodoxy. I don’t think it’s up to the institution (the [Commission on Appraisal] or even the General Assembly) to define the principles for us. In fact, I think it contradicts our commitment to freedom of belief.”⁷

Each and every one of you has a chance to influence the future of Unitarian Universalism to a degree not seen in a generation! Whatever you say (or do not say) to the Commission on Appraisal will influence Unitarian Universalism during your lifespan and beyond. If you are visiting today, you might be wondering, “Have I wandered into a family fight? What is she talking about?”

Every religious tradition does some soul searching now and then, reflecting upon what holds it together and how it can be relevant in the lives of people inside and outside the walls of the congregation. Unitarian Universalist soul searching is messier than the soul searching found in many other religious traditions because here, religious authority resides in the conscience of the individual. Here, each congregation governs itself.

Unitarian Universalist soul searching is messy in the way that kids playing with a garden hose on a hot summer day is a messy proposition! It is messy, and it is refreshing! What a privilege we have to play such an active role in shaping our religious tradition. I would not have it any other way.

The Rev. Forrest Church writes, “Many denominations are known according to their form of polity or organization. For instance, Episcopalians grant supreme authority to their bishops,

⁷ See <http://revsean.com/?p=545>

Presbyterians to their presbyters or elders, and Congregationalists to each congregation – Unitarian Universalists are congregational in polity, but this is not reflected in our name . . . Unitarianism refers to a belief in the unity of God, distinguishing early Unitarians from Trinitarians; and Universalism affirms salvation for all people. The two come together to form *the most doctrinally free of all denominations* [emphasis added] which, ironically, has two doctrines in its name.”⁸

May we embrace absurdities and ironies as we shape our living religious tradition. May we remain oriented to our own “true North,” and may we care to learn about the “true North” of the people around us. May it be so!

⁸ *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, Revised Edition, John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, Beacon Press, Boston, 1998, p. 42.