

Got Values?

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

E pluribus unum.

This is written on the Great Seal of the United States, representing the root principle of our nation: from many, one. This ideal of uniting a diverse population into a cohesive whole has presented quite a challenge for the last 200 years or so. But hasn't this always been the challenge of living in community? People are different from one another, after all – how do we achieve unity despite difference?

The rule of law provides one answer. A set of rules that apply to everyone equally would seem like a good idea until we come to understand that those who make the laws generally don't appreciate the extent to which their point of view, their sense of reality, is derived from a particularity of experience that might be quite different from others.

The rule of law gives us one set of rules for people with diverse perspectives, comfortable for some, less so for others. This is how governments address the task of creating a cohesive society. It provides a set of extrinsic reasons to behave; reasons that come from outside the self and are enforced by legal means of coercion and punishment, comfortable for some, less so for others.

But we all know there is a better way of creating a cohesive community: from within. And one of religion's most valuable contributions is that it teaches people the value of behaving with kindness and respect because they want to, not because they have to. Of course, the easiest way to accomplish this is to share one set of beliefs, one doctrine, one creed. But that doesn't work so well when the community is a diverse one. This is the challenge that the United States of America faces today, as does our beloved community, the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley.

We can see a clear line of moral evolution in developing children. When they are little, they can't understand why they should behave one way or another, so parents usually provide incentives of reward or admonishment to nurture certain standards of behavior, like, say, not drinking out of the toilet. But as children grow, they experience a natural desire for intrinsic motivation. They want to be the authors of their own experience. They want to know the reasons that underlie the rules they must follow, so they ask, "Why?"

"Don't do that."

"Why?"

"Because it's dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because there are germs in there."

"Why?"

"Because people poop in there."

"Why?"

And, of course, this can go on and on and on. Sometimes parents get exasperated and say things like, "Because I told you so," reverting to extrinsic moral authority. But children really do want to know why, even though they might ask sometimes just to get a rise out of us.

Part of the reason for our exasperation could be that Americans are not trained to be morally or philosophically sophisticated. We're not an introspective people who spend much time analyzing our own motives, asking ourselves, "Why" until we get to the root of our desires and behavior. We're much more likely to spend our energy trying to figure out what we want and how to get it than wondering why we want what we want.

So Americans tend to follow the simpler route of basing their desires on external measures; we turn to various authorities to justify our actions. So we rely on sources like a God who told us how to behave, science that has revealed truths about what we should do, or cultural norms of behavior that endorse our way of behaving and being in the world.

There's a pretty good reason why we Americans don't examine our motives too closely. Our culture is built on a foundation of conflicting values. We say we value equality, but our system is based on exploitation of some for the benefit of others. We say believe in hard work and discipline but spend countless hours in the pursuit of pleasure. We claim to base our values on a religion that teaches us forgiveness but respond to nearly every challenge by finding someone to blame and punish. We value generosity but abide by an economic system that is based on greed; that does not respect humane values. If we examined our motives too closely, we might come to the troubling understanding that we live in a hypocritical culture.

Children ask "why," because they want to know why they need to behave in certain ways, and in that they're no different from adults. We all want to be the authors of our actions. We want to choose what to do. This is why extrinsic motivations are unsatisfying: they depend on an external authority. Intrinsic motivations are satisfying because they are expressions of our own wills, of doing what we want to do.

Religions exist to give us a set of values upon which to base our lives. Unfortunately, they often forego the ideal goal of nurturing intrinsically motivated behavior and substitute a set of external authorities with rewards and punishments to enforce behavior. When communities like ours come together in rejection of those systems of external authority, like judgment, damnation, heaven & hell, we run the risk of trying to be a community without a clear set of commonly held values.

Some Unitarian Universalists have addressed this by saying that since Unitarian Universalists can't agree on what they believe, we agree on what we will do. This is the basis of a covenantal faith like ours: we agree on what we will do together. But because we share so many differing if not conflicting perspectives we run the risk of pulling in different directions even as we claim to be working together. How do we reconcile apparent opposites like spirit and reason, liberal and conservative, empiricism and faith?

In order to come together as a truly beloved community, we need to understand the root values we all share. Since I arrived nearly two years ago, I've asked the question, "Why does this church exist" in many contexts and settings, getting varied and often confused answers. So this fall, when Cecilia Eberhard asked me, on behalf of the Long Range Planning Committee, what they could do to help move this congregation forward in ways beyond the physical facilities, I invited them to help lead a process of discernment that could result to a clear, concise, shared understanding of what the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley stood for. The Board chartered a Core Mission Task force to be made up of the Long Range Planning Committee with members of the Committee on Ministry.

Many, if not most of you took part in this endeavor. I preached a series of sermons on what church is for. We had a congregational gathering following the April 8th service where folks worked in groups to come up with answers to the question, "What is this church for?" The answers fell into three main categories: community, personal growth, and social action.

The community-based answers included:

- To be a nurturing community of mutual acceptance and respect
- Catch us when we fail, and learn to begin again
- Multigenerational interaction
- Nurture growth and education for our multigenerational community
- A place for social gathering and spiritual communion
- Fellowship
- Safe community
- Safe sanctuary for the free expression of ideas and open worship experience
- Caring church community

- Acceptance: sense of family and belonging with like-minded and different-minded individuals

The personal growth area included:

- Nurture spiritual growth
- Bridge the gap between the mystical and the physical
- Encouraging personal growth and self discovery
- Positive liberal alternative to conservative dogma

And the social action suggestions included:

- Home for the homeless, hope for the hopeless, and friend to the friendless
- Help heal the world
- Social action: globally and in community and politically
- Promote community outreach
- Advocate for social justice
- To provide a focal point to put our thoughts and values into action
- Be a catalyst for change

The Task Force met to process this information and combined the answers from the three areas into three comprehensive statements:

1. To be a safe, nurturing multigenerational community
2. To help heal the world
3. To nurture spiritual growth and self discovery

They then asked each group, cluster, and committee in the church to spend a few minutes asking that vital question, “Why?” Whether or not you agreed with the ways these questions were phrased, what underlying values do each of these answers express? Could we discern a set of bedrock, fundamental values upon

which our many diversities all were based? We suggested about forty possible “values words” to use, but invited participants to offer their own as well.

The task force met again and found a wonderful richness in the values expressed.

The community category included: acceptance, belonging, caring, compassion, dignity, family & children, inclusion, love, nurturing, respect, and understanding.

The personal growth category included: creativity, curiosity, inner peace, inspiration, intellectual, love, music, mystery, spirituality, understanding, and wholeness.

Finally, the justice category included: action, compassion, connectivity, equality, freedom, harmony, love, mission, open-mindedness, responsibility, and understanding.

I find it interesting to note that all three categories include the root values of love and understanding, values common to all religious traditions.

The Task Force worked hard to render these values in their common essence, while being mindful that not all values were equally acceptable to various portions of our beloved community.

The final result that they have asked me to put forward to you is this: The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley is a compassionate community nurturing personal growth and working for justice. We are a compassionate community nurturing personal growth and working for justice.

I believe that these root values express the commonly-held values of our community even as they reflect the nature of healthy religion everywhere.

First, and foremost, the church provides a sanctuary, safe place for people of all kinds to come together without fear. In a community based in compassion, individuals would always consider and respect the perspectives and personal feelings of everyone. No one would consider their own emotional state to be authoritative beyond themselves, either in joy or in anger.

Secondly, the feeling of safety is essential for us to do the dangerous work of opening our hearts and minds in the process of personal growth and development. An atmosphere of trust and respect is vital, whether one is nurturing intellectual curiosity, artistic creativity, inspiration, or inner peace and spiritual growth.

And, third, no religious community is complete without action. We are called to be the conscience of our community, to uplift the values we hold dear, work to make them real, while challenging others to meet us in the creation of a world with fairness, justice, equality, and freedom for all.

I believe that this statement is something we can build on: The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley is a compassionate community nurturing personal growth and working for justice.

May it be so.

I want you to know that this statement of core values is not a done deal. I invite you to think about it, respond to it, and tell the members of the task force what you think. [Introduce Cecilia Eberhardt, Cease Blocker, Lisa Gerstenblith, Ellen Bell, and Tom Repasch.]

If you agree, they'd like to put it up for a vote of congregational approval at our annual meeting June 10.