

*Sermon on Acceptance of One Another –
The First Half of the Third UU Principle
By Mark Albright – July 10, 2011*

Well . . . I'm back . . . *again*. Just two services ago, I kicked off our summer of exploring Unitarian Universalism's Seven Principles by talking about our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Today, along with Rocky Bayer, I'll be exploring our Third Principle, "*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.*" This is a meaty enough topic that I'll be taking the first half – **acceptance of one another** – and Rocky will address the second, **encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations**.

I must again offer the disclaimer that I only began attending this church in 2004 when I met my wife, Colleen, and as a result, am kind of a "newborn" Unitarian Universalist who suffers an occasional relapse, longing at times for the perfect organization and precision scheduling of my former Presbyterian congregation.

Alas, being a UU is nothing if not messy, and more than a little chaotic. And that brings me to my topic today – acceptance of one another. I've borrowed quite heavily – if not outright stolen – from an earlier sermon on this topic by Jason Shelton, of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville back in 2003, and I'm wholly indebted to him for his insights on this Principle.

The sacred traditions from many faiths – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and others – make it abundantly clear that we UU's are not the first to explore questions of difference among humankind. People have tried to understand difference for as long as there have **been** people. What **I** find amazing in these stories is that they often seem to claim difference as being divinely instituted. The most striking of such stories for me is one from the Muslim Qur'an. It claims that Allah made us different as a way to **test** us, to see if we will waste our time trying to convert everyone to one faith or if we will instead compete with one another in good works. Our *difference*, then, becomes our inspiration for building up humanity as a whole.

Challenging humankind to allow, and perhaps even *celebrate*, our differences cautions us against turning our pluralism – our "**more than one-ness**" – into **relativism**, which is the idea that the many are essentially the same. A classic example of this is seen in many weddings, when the couple lights their unity candle. Now I'm not opposed to the idea of the candle itself, but I always cringe when I see people blow out their individual candles after lighting the one central candle. Yes, there is a new oneness which is created in the bonds of a couple's relationship, but that oneness **only** exists because of the uniqueness of the two individuals who create it. Perhaps it is paradoxical, but it seems to me that the two are one *because* they are two.

And so, when we look at the ways pluralism affects our community, I would say that the same paradox holds true. We are bonded to one another as a community not because of our sameness, but because of our difference. We are one because we are many. The danger of pluralistic relativism is that it wants to obscure our differences and say that we are all basically the same. It wants to place equal value on every possible "truth" without being able to make any judgments about them. It is part of the reason why liberalism, which had been **gaining** in popularity through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, took a nose-dive mid-century – its tendency

toward relativism couldn't cope with the enormity of the atrocities surrounding the Second World War. In the face of what most of the world called overwhelming evil, many liberals in that day were unable to reconcile what was clearly wrong with their "*let individuals decide for themselves*" ideology. It is a struggle many of us still share.

But we might argue that even pluralistic relativism, with all of its pitfalls, is certainly preferable to an exclusivist, "*we're right and everyone else must be wrong*" approach to theology or community. And I would certainly agree. However, I would first argue that we need to re-conceptualize the way we understand these categories.

I find the work of American philosopher Ken Wilber most helpful in this area. In his book, *A Theory of Everything*, Wilber puts forward an integrated model of developmental psychology, spirituality, and scientific development. He says that we traditionally think of categories like **exclusivist**, or **rationalist**, or **pluralist** in terms of a vertical hierarchy – each one better than the other. This is, of course, only true if you happen to be looking at the issue from the pluralist's perspective. Wilber argues for a *nested* hierarchy, or as successive, outward-moving developmental waves in which each category is a level that transcends and includes the others.

The key to this model is inclusion. I freely admit I sometimes think "**my**" pluralism is better than "**other peoples**" exclusivism, which is often also called *fundamentalism*. After all, that makes me more enlightened, or more evolved in my understanding of the way the world is than they are! Basically, I get it, and they don't. But Wilber's model demands that the pluralist move beyond their own narrow limitations into a more holistic understanding. He calls this post-pluralistic level "**integralism**."

The non-integrated approach claims that where I am is where everyone should be. But the integrated, holistic model sees the narrow, pre-integral levels as necessary to the overall development process. That is, without exclusivism, rationalism, or pluralism as formative elements, we would never be able to reach an integrated level of consciousness.

Let me try to frame it another way. If we were to trace our own spiritual development over our lifetime, I bet that for many of us it would look something like this: As young children, we believed what our parents told us. Everything they said was literally true, and we could not even begin to challenge their notions of reality. But somewhere along the line, perhaps in our teenage years, we started to notice that their picture of the world didn't always make sense. It didn't hold up to scientific inquiry. For many people, this is the stage at which they abandoned religion altogether.

Sometime later we came to see that the issue of religion might just be worth another look. Otherwise, you probably wouldn't be here right now. Maybe there **is** something to this religion thing, and maybe I **could** benefit from learning about it and being with *others* who want to learn about it, too. And so we began again our lifelong spiritual journey.

The integral model recognizes that each wave of development is a necessary part of our becoming. But it also recognizes that we can never really leave any stage behind – they are always part of who we are. We must transcend and include.

So often I hear Unitarian Universalists talking about wanting more diversity in our congregations, and we unthinkingly lament how many of us seem to be the same in certain racial, economic or educational areas. Well, I can look around the room right now and tell you that this is simply not true. Further, when we fall into this way of thinking we fail to recognize the diversity that abounds in every facet of our life in this community. We must assume difference as a starting point in our relationships, and if we want our community to grow and flourish we have a responsibility to discover what those differences are. Just as I have a familial, cultural, educational and experiential background unlike anyone else in this room, so do we all. When we get to the point of sharing at this level, I believe we can find the diversity we value so highly right here, right now. Let's interact with each other, honestly, non-judgmentally, frequently, joyfully – and learn to revel in the social buffet created by each others' differences.

Blessed be!