

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM'S FIRST PRINCIPLE

A Talk Delivered by Mark Albright

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

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Many of you know I've only been a Unitarian Universalist since around 2004, when I began dating my wife, Colleen, and attending this church. As a result, in bracing myself to handle even a **portion** of a sermon on the UU First Principle, I researched the topic pretty heavily. As a result, I've borrowed the substance of my talk this morning from two earlier sermons, one by Stephen Landale at the UU Church in Eugene Oregon in 2007, and another by Roger Fritts at the Cedar Lane UU Church in Bethesda, Maryland in 2008. I am entirely indebted to them for their insights, which I'm happy to share with all of you.

You have heard it said of Unitarian Universalists: getting us to agree with one another is like herding cats!

And yet at our 1984 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, after considerable debate, and several amendments from the floor, and this following years of committee meetings and sermons and coffee hour conversations, somehow the cats allowed themselves to be herded under a statement which came to be known as "The Principles and Purposes." It now has a place in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as well as in our hymnals, immediately preceding the first hymn.

Unitarianism and Universalism, separate religions until the consolidation in 1961, long struggled with creedal statements... particularly Unitarians! As liberal religious people who cherish individual freedom of belief, as proud heretics who don't want to be in the position of quashing dissent, we have been uncomfortable with anything like a creed.

However, many forces have, after two hundred years, brought us back to the table with pen and paper. We yearn for meaning, for clarity of purpose, for relevance. Our openness can become interpreted as "anything goes," as if our congregations were places where people can say and do whatever they want, without any accountability to ideals or to relationships. In fact, during the 1970s's when the move towards the current Principles and Purposes began, this "anything goes" attitude led to irresponsible behavior on the part of many, including ministers. The Principles and Purposes were part of an effort to re-locate our center, our cohesion, our integrity.

Is it possible for a religious faith to respect individual freedom of belief while still raising up common values, goals, and even guidelines for behavior? Our Unitarian Universalist tradition proves that it's possible ... perhaps even necessary. We must do our best at naming words we can stand by: words to guide us, words to provide for others - and ourselves - a measure for our actions.

Freedom of *belief*, yes; freedom *from responsibility*, no.

While we don't force one another into statements of belief, we do form and strive to live by statements about how we will be with one another and with the world. We don't issue creeds; we form and live covenants.

Our first Principle is a call to make the time and effort to get to know people in their particularities – especially those people from unfamiliar backgrounds.

A religious community covenanted to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person is gently yet continuously stretching itself – noticing who is missing, actively seeking out those whose lives seem foreign, building relationships with and spreading the stories of those whose worth and dignity are jeopardized – and doing our best to help them be restored to a place of worth and dignity.

I think often of a simple story that is told about the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day. One day she was in her office at the Catholic Worker settlement house in New York talking with a man, a street person, dirty and smelly. He was nearly incoherent, confused, perhaps mentally ill. One of her assistants stuck his head in the door, and she said ***“Did you want to speak to one of us?”***

It was a simple way to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. She did not say ***“Yes, what do you want?”*** She did not make the assumption that the assistant wanted her. She said: ***“Did you want to speak to one of us?”***

When I am tempted to ignore another person because I do not think he or she is important because of a prejudice I carry inside me, I try to remind myself of this simple story about Dorothy Day.

Let us listen to the demands of love.
