

**The Ethical Principles and Spiritual Resources
That Guide Our Behavior**

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I would like to open with one of my favorite quotes. It is not in your program.

“Religion is fossilized philosophy” – Christopher Hitchens.

This is true, but it doesn't need to be that way. As our opening words suggested, in the beginning, religion, philosophy, science and politics were not separated they were all basically one broad field of inquiry that constituted the exploration of our human experience.

Overtime they became separated. And eventually they became competitors. Christianity was in large part of a major contributor to the separation of these fields of inquiries. As I have said it doesn't need to be this way.

No matter how we look at it there are really only three questions that are critical importance to our existence.

- 1.who are we?
- 2 why are we here?
- 3 how can we live well together?

It is my position that neither philosophy nor science nor politics nor religion have domain over any of these three questions. The answers to these questions lie in the contribution of all of these fields of human inquiry. The Greeks understood this but somehow we seem to have lost this understanding.

It has always been my belief that Unitarian Universalism and other liberal syncretic religions can return us to this integrated approach to understanding the human condition. So what do I mean by syncretic.?

Syncretic means:

The reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief, as in philosophy or religion, especially when success is partial or the result is heterogeneous.—in other words, an imperfect answer to our questions.

This is an essential feature of Unitarian Universalism. Synthesis of information from multiple sources is a hallmark of how we see the world. Consistency is in fact the hobgoblin of small minds when it comes to the fusion of such information. For myself, it is learning to live with doubt and ambiguity rather than absolute certainty that allows me to live with the imperfection of our knowledge, and yet learn from it, and appreciate it --even though I know the pursuit is endless. This brings us to the sources that we use depend upon to guide our spiritual journeys.

They are as follows:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

(The key concepts here are "affirmed in all cultures" and "openness.")

"There is no single source of information or inspiration. Our understanding is always imperfect. Above all we do not accept any truth on the basis of authority alone. This is of course the definition of dogma. Dogmatism is the polar opposite of syncretism. Nonetheless, we must be constantly on guard against our own natural tendencies to become dogmatic – to accept something is true on the basis of authority alone, to accept it because it has "always been that way". This is probably what the dinosaurs were thinking right up to the point that the asteroid hit. And, as we have seen within the last couple weeks getting hit by a celestial objects is a real possibility!

Nor is the source of any truth infallible nor is truth itself eternal for that matter. After all, the Pope wasn't infallible until the 1870's. This is why one of our key principles, "a responsible search for the truth" says search for the truth, not accept the truth, not defend the truth, not know the truth.... This principle implies quite accurately that such searching never ends. It also suggests quite accurately that the truth is dynamic and that it does in fact change over time. As our understanding improves and grows so does the truth improve and grow, and consequently so does our spiritual growth

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;

When it comes to the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, I tend to take the Broad view. I include among the prophets not only the Old Testament prophets, but also Jesus, Mohammad, the Buddha, Mary Magdalene, Thomas the Doubter,(I find value in the mysticism of the Gnostic Gospels) The Sufi poet Rumi, Emerson, Thoreau, Joseph Campbell, Gandhi, Eric Hoffer, Paul Tillich, Joseph Fletcher, Socrates, even Adam Smith, as well as numerous of the Enlightenment philosophers. Among this number I include Thomas Jefferson because of his version of the New Testament known as the

Jefferson Bible. It is to me as it was to him, the essence of what is important about what Jesus had to say. It is that and nothing more, which is why it is so powerful.

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Our reading this morning provides us with a good example of how one can learn from other religions. "Unto the Church Universal" was written by Keshab Chandra Sen. His reference to the Church Universal, was not about Universalism as in universal salvation or reconciliation. It was about a single universal church a "Catholic church" in the true sense of the word. Sen was active in the 1850s. He was an upper caste Hindu, who was also a social reformer. He came under the influence of a "Unitarian missionary" and also a Christian missionary. It's interesting in the description of Sen's life, there is a distinction drawn between the Unitarian missionary and Christian missionary! It is a distinction many of us still draw today, and it is one that I personally believe inaccurate and unnecessary. In any case, among other efforts at social action, Sen started a school for poor children. It was not much of a success it only lasted 3 years—but he was a social reformer in the cast system of India that was in close partnership with the class system of the British Empire. His ultimate goal however was not education or serving the disadvantaged, but to create the most perfect religion in the world. To do this he sought to integrate Christianity into Hinduism. His idea was that his form of Hinduism was the closest to perfection a religion had come, and that refining it by folding in Christian principles, the perfect religion could be created. He lived during the time of the peak of the British Empire during the Raj in India. The British became much enamored of him because they thought he was attempting to merge Hinduism into Christianity instead the other way around. They even had him travel to England to talk about his efforts. Alas, he became very disappointed with the response of the British to his efforts and in the end his perfect religion went nowhere. He did however leave us with a very nice reading this morning, one that I return to often.

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;

Warning us against the idolatries of mind and spirit--This is the essence of what Joseph Campbell was talking about when he described what happens when metaphors become reality in religion. The next step, after metaphor becoming reality is often dogma and faith becomes the enemy of reason, instead of a partner to it in a responsible search for truth. Science increases our understanding of spirituality; it does not deny it. A responsible (read rationale) search for the truth which is what science does, and, it serves to continuously refine our understanding of those 3 basic questions I stated at the beginning of this of this talk.

1.who are we?

2 why are we here?

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However, science is after all in the end a human endeavor, and is subject to the same pitfalls as religion. Scientific dogma is no less prevalent than religious dogma. And science is just as prone to convert metaphor into fact as any other human endeavor. As proof I give the you the “Invisible Hand” in economics—a classic metaphor that has taken on an air of fact that is too often dogmatically accepted an immutable truth. This kind of error is certainly not limited to Economics. In the past, in physics, we have had phlogiston and ether, and who knows, maybe dark matter and dark energy may one day be considered metaphors that are no longer useful.

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.

To me, one of the truest signs of tragic Greek hubris in Mankind is our penchant for seeking to rise above nature—to be apart and separate from nature, rather than to continually refine our place in it. The Judeo Christian tenant of “dominion over Nature” is the clearest example of this hubris, and make no mistake this hubris is what has allowed us to cavalierly continue to destroy the environment upon which we depend for our existence. Note I said “the environment upon which we depend”. Nature will not be destroyed. The earth was here before us and will certainly be here after we are gone. How long it is, before we are gone depends entirely on our understanding of our place in Nature, and how we can adapt to it. This is an essential understanding we can gain from this final source of our knowledge. This understanding is both rationale and conscious, and paradoxically spiritually “felt” or “experienced” instead of understood.

So, this is how I see and use our Sources. What are some of your understandings of how and when we should use these sources? Which ones most appeal to you? We will take a few minutes so you can share your thoughts then we will move on the Principles we live by.

[Discussion]

The Principles are listed on the inside cover of your Programs. It is obvious that there is little anyone could have a problem with these Principles. The value of these Principles is not in the perceived eternal truths (or truisms) they encompass. Rather, it is in having a clear set of guidelines to help us on our individual journeys of enlightenment, intellectual growth, or spiritual growth—take your pick. They are also rather polemical and it has always struck me as perhaps a little strident. I sometimes think we don’t see these as principles guiding our own growth, but as a clear set of objectives we need to realize for everyone else. In short we have the “Truth” and now all we need to do is evangelize it to all those rigid, dogmatic, prejudiced and shallow members of the groups

with whom we politically and morally disagree. . Our current President, Peter Morales said as much in the most recent issue of UU World.

For me, the principles are not a call to Social Action—though there is certainly nothing wrong with that. When you have some time, I would urge you to explore your own relationship with them in context of your own beliefs. Think about how you might develop some techniques to keep these principles in the front of your mind as you go about your daily routine. I will be honest, I have found it to be extremely difficult.

1. *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*;---This is for me a very difficult principle to follow. When I listen to our elected officials and realize they are in large part the result of “the use of the democratic process, “ another of our principles, I find it extremely difficult to perceive their worth. And when I look at their actions I have great difficulty is seeing the dignity! So, what do we do when we are faced an obligation to see the worth and dignity in people who are clearly exhibiting no “Justice, equity or compassion” in their actions. (Another of our principles) No, really—what do we do?

[Short Discussion Here]

2. *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*;--- Again, I have great difficulty having compassion for individuals who seem to be so woefully short of it themselves. When I hear “the makers” and “takers” dichotomy that is so clearly designed to split our sense of community, compassion is hard to come by. This does not mean I can’t understand why some people think this way. It is for many, a simple understandable explanation of the difficult and complex of problems we all face—resulting from the economic decline and political stagnation we have experienced over the last three decades. That I can understand it, does not mean I can justify such a belief.

To understand a belief or action that is antithetical to your own belief, is not to accept that belief. And, equity in human relations is not nearly so self evident as it appears at first glance. Affirmative Action is to me an inequitable solution to a great wrong done a significant segment of our society. Is it a just solution? Innocent people are in fact hurt by affirmative action, especially in professional education. But, is this a “good” inequity. Can I accept such a concept and still have adherence to our principle of justice, equity and compassion? And how do I experience true compassion for those with whom I am in such complete disagreement, without that compassion being a masquerade for my true feelings?

3. *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*;--- Whether you know it or not, we are heretics. Unitarianism

- Even though we like to think our roots began with Bishop David in Transylvania in the 16th century, our roots go back as far as fourth century. By the way, Bishop David was apparently a Calvinist Bishop..
- Past and present Christian faiths that do not believe in the Trinity include:
 - Arianism (4th century) this was a very widespread and persistent heresy.
 - Jehovah's Witnesses
 - Mormons
 - Today, there are two major branches—UUA and the Christian Unitarian Association

Universalism

- Origen of Alexandria (c.185 - c.254) was very early Universalist. While greatly admired, he was eventually declared a heretic.
- Gregory of Nyassa in the 4th century was another early adherent. He also was greatly admired, and interestingly he was not labeled a heretic.
- Foundations of modern Universalism began in the 18th Century. Dr. Benjamin Rush was a Universalist. It has always struck me as ironic that this Universalist was the one who was finally able to get to of our most well known feuding Unitarians to reconcile. (Jefferson and Adams) Yes, I am aware that Jefferson was never publically a Unitarian, but for those of you who remember our presentation on the religious writings of Jefferson and Adams, it is safe to say Jefferson adhered to many of the Unitarian principles of his day.
- Today, there are two major branches, UUA and Christian Universalist Association.

This takes care of our name. But as all of you are aware, we embrace any discipline or individual that seeks or promotes spiritual growth and understanding, including Atheists and Agnostics.

I included the quotes on religious intolerance in the Program for today to make a point. That point I would like to distinguish between Atheist and Anti-theists. There is a qualitative difference between those don't believe in God or a God, and those who adamantly opposed to anyone else holding such a belief. The opening quote about "*religion is fossilized philosophy*" was from Christopher Hitchens who would classify as an anti-theist. To me it is important that we believe in something, and not simply oppose belief or faith. As the quote from Eric Hoffer states:

"The opposite of the religious fanatic is not the fanatical atheist, but the gentle cynic who cares not whether there is a god or not."

Opposition alone seems contrary to spiritual growth—but this is a personal opinion. We also embrace agnosticism, which is good thing for me since I am one. In this light, I find great insight in the quote by Joseph Campbell that:

“God is a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought—it is as simple as that.”

And of course we embrace humanism, and it is for this we are probably best known. The only beliefs we seem to have difficulty with are traditional Christianity—especially the divinity of Christ. This is probably understandable given our Unitarian roots, but it has always bothered me that we seem to have a more or less unconscious antipathy toward Christian Theology. Perhaps we are better at accepting the new and unknown than we are at reconciling what was surely the past for most of us. The existence of the Christian Unitarian Association separate from UUA is proof of this.

4. *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;---*for me if I were able to address in any depth the six questions of Socrates, I would have truly realized a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The questions are:

- What is virtue?
- What is moderation?
- What is justice?
- What is courage?
- What is good?
- What is piety?

As I said earlier, I sometimes feel our principles are not really focused on our own growth, but on our perception of the need for growth in others—especially those with whom we disagree. This is perhaps a laudable goal. For me, I believe that if I look inward and focus on the above questions, then I am much more likely to have some positive effect on the promotion of our principles. The most interesting of all of questions of Socrates is what is moderation? I know in my own life it has escaped me—and I really need to know. It has always been curious to me that *“moderation”* is not readily apparent in any our UU Principles.

5. *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;---*not much needs to be said about this principle by me. As many of you know I am also a Quaker, and right of conscience is essential to our understanding. The question I would pose to you on the democratic process was alluded to earlier. What is our moral ethical responsibility when the result of a democratic process produces results that are in direct conflict with our other principles? How far can I push the cause of

justice until it undermines the principle of the democratic process? A democratic process only guarantees a majority decision—not the correct moral or ethical outcome—whatever that may be.

6. *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;* --What can I say—it is good to have a goal. When our conservative friends see a goal of world community, they immediately perceive a threat to their liberty and to justice. So this is not as straightforward principle as it might seem. Globalization, instant worldwide communication, multinational corporations and an integrated worldwide financial system, has given us a global economy. What will it take to give us a global community that integrates both a justice system and a democratic political system to go with our global economy? This is a principle that truly makes me ambivalent. While I am not really concerned about it happening any time soon—it also engenders a response in me of “be careful what you wish for”.
7. *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*—As I said earlier, while it is true we must respect nature, it is essential that we understand our place in it, and how over long run, we can continue to have a place in it. Again, it is one thing to say that you are a steward of the environment. It is another to understand you are completely and totally integrated component of that same environment. Truly a case of *physician heal thyself!*

So, to me, our Principles sound really great, but are exceptionally difficult to implement—at least for me. Don’t get me wrong, I agree with all of them, and I think they are great statements of what I believe. The essence of their meaning is essential to our moral, spiritual and political growth. So, to bring them down to a series of statements to live by rather than as a somewhat abstract call to action, I offer the following.

- Each person is important.
- Be kind in all you do.
- We're free to learn together.
- We search for what is true.
- All people need a voice.
- Build a fair and peaceful world.
- We care for Earth's lifeboat.

This restatement of our principles is drawn from the [UU Educational Program for Kids](#). I am a believer in the simple declarative sentence. These principles for kids are stated in a way that I can easily incorporate into my life and my everyday activities. They are simple direct guidance on how we should live our lives. These I can live with.

So why am I a UU? Because I believe that the UU view of our responsibilities to ourselves and our community—as articulated by the Sources and the Principles—coupled with our inclusive nature and our willingness to learn from many sources, provides a framework for the potential re-integration of religion, science, philosophy and politics into the single intellectual endeavor it once was. I think there is some support for this vision when we look at what our Enlightenment founders were able to accomplish.

Our founding fathers were very careful to call what they were doing a “revolution” not a “rebellion”. They were men of the Enlightenment. They admired democracy as the purest form of government. It had in their view, not been realized since Greece. Thus they saw what they were doing as an evolution coming full circle to democracy, a revolution if you will—not the creation of democracy. In Unitarian Universalism I see a potential framework for another revolution. This time, a revolution to move toward the re-integration of all endeavors to seek knowledge of the human experience, and with it, the full realization of our potential.

So we have ended where we began. What do you think?

[Closing Discussion]

Some Quotes to Help You Think—What Do You Believe?

On Religion/Spirituality:

“All the gods, all the heavens, all the hells, are within you.” --*Joseph Campbell*

“I don't have to have faith, I have experience.”-- *Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth*

"A one sentence definition of mythology? "Mythology" is what we call someone else's religion"--*Joseph Campbell*

On Belief and Atheism:

“Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think

religious metaphors are lies.”-- *Joseph Campbell, Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*

"The opposite of the religious fanatic is not the fanatical atheist but the gentle cynic who cares not whether there is a god or not."--*Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (1951)*

On Doctrine/Dogma:

"Every religion is true one way or another. It is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck in its own metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble...God is a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought. It's as simple as that".--*Joseph Campbell*

"A doctrine [Dogma] insulates the devout not only against the realities around them but also against their own selves. The fanatical believer is not conscious of his envy, malice, pettiness and dishonesty. There is a wall of words between his consciousness and his real self."--*Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (1951)*

On Religious Intolerance:

"Instead of clearing his own heart the zealot tries to clear the world."— *Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces*
"Take away hatred from some people, and you have men without faith."-- *Eric Hoffer, The Passionate State of Mind*

Closing Circle:

“The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, match your nature with Nature”—*Joseph Campbell*

“One way or another, we all have to find what best fosters the flowering of our humanity in this contemporary life, and dedicate ourselves to that.” --*Joseph Campbell*