

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and swirling vines in shades of brown, tan, and cream against a textured, wood-grain-like background.

A Work in Progress

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Unitarian Universalism is not a religion that is set in stone. We do not strictly adhere to one specific Holy Book, or a singular set of teachings. We make a point to seek out many sources, knowing that no one religion has a monopoly on wisdom or spiritual fulfillment. We encourage and actively celebrate our differences. We respect each other, the Earth and honor the force which connects us all. Some call it Love, others, Spirit, the Universe, God, Yahweh ... A rose by any other name, right? We are mindful, considerate and amenable to change. We value and strive for justice on small as well as grand scales. We stress the importance of conscience and equity in all we do.

We have our principles, which we use as guideposts and goals for how to be, with each other and in the world. I for one, appreciate the straightforward logical approach Unitarian Universalism takes as opposed to the fear based approaches of other religions.

We have a wonderful foundation on which to build our faith.

I'm going to pause here. While what I have just said is absolutely true, we must take care to temper these beautifully high-minded ideals with action, or we run the risk of becoming closed off, self-aggrandizing, elitist, and most ironically, holier than thou. When we get sucked into this mindset, we have forgotten that no one person is perfect, and no one spiritual path is perfect. Unitarian Universalism is A Work in Progress, and so is each one of us.

While writing sermons, I often reflect on my own religious education and upbringing. As some of you may know I am a Recovering Catholic. So for me, the idea that Unitarian Universalism presents of not requiring one to reach a state of perfection, of not having a prescription for thought and behavior to be perfect is both freeing and a little frightening. That opens up so many possibilities. The religious leaders of my youth impressed upon me that I was inherently bad, and must work to free myself of sin, so that I **might** be rewarded after I died. When, not if, you sinned, there were specific prayers you could repeat after confessing every embarrassing detail of that sin to someone who had a direct line to God. That is heavy fare for an eight-year-old, indeed. Here is my confession. I still struggle with being a perfectionist and the idea that I have to be perfect in order to have worth. I can tell you from Direct Experience that a perfectionist mindset is not a good headspace. It undermines your confidence and erodes your sense of self. It isn't productive or helpful, it gets in the way. It brings to a screeching halt our work in progress. It prevents us from being and celebrating our authentic selves. Anne Lamott is an author I very much enjoy, who has written many books, some fiction, some on faith and recovery, and in my opinion, some of her best are on writing. Here is her perspective on perfectionism:

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.” - Anne Lamott

Put aside the notion of being perfect, and embrace the idea that we are unfinished, growing, developing and therefore learning! I mean, really see the beauty of that imperfection. Then, I believe we can do the progressive work our UU faith expects, no, demands of us. We are never truly done. As with many things this work begins within us. The First Principle says, We Affirm and Promote the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Respecting others affirms their worth and dignity, of course. We know that. What if, we understood that this

Principle can and should also be applied to oneself. We could then ask ourselves, Am I making choices that respect and honor who I am, and what I stand for? Am I treating myself with respect and behaving with dignity? Am I taking time to realize and appreciate my own worth as a human blessed with life? I believe if you can answer yes to these questions most of the time, you're on the right track. What about those times when you can't answer yes. Those times where you are fighting against those internalized criticisms we all have. Sometimes they're awfully loud.

Knowing you have Beloved Community to turn to can be a refuge in the storm. We have each other. We share our joys and our sorrows. There is not one person here that must go it alone.

"Perfectionism is internalized oppression." - Gloria Steinem

Being a work in progress is diametrically opposed to being perfect. Being perfect is rigid, unyielding. It offers no flexibility, no wiggle room. It puts people in neat little boxes with labels that often times do not fit. Perfect does not allow for diversity of opinion. Perfect doesn't care about the process, only the product. Perfect stifles creativity, and impedes understanding. Perfect is judgmental and closed off. One size does not fit all, especially when it comes to matters of religion and faith. Unitarian Universalism understands this, and offers an alternative.

If we can embrace the idea of letting go of that urge to be perfect, to be all things to all people, we may be pleasantly surprised.

When you are a work in progress, you are able to breathe, and move. You can explore and stretch yourself in new ways. You are enriched by the symphony

of life that surrounds you and fills you. You can question, ponder, and search freely for what is most meaningful for you. You can come to find others who may have a much different story, but who are also seeking, searching. Perhaps that is a place where you find meaning. You know that mistakes are not mistakes, but opportunities to learn what not to do next time. You see the value in the process, secure in the knowledge that it is the journey that matters. When you are a work in progress, you realize how vast this world is, and how much there is to learn. You do your best, and know that is enough. You push on when it's difficult, especially when it is difficult.

The definition of progress is to move forward, proceed. Also, and I like this one best, to develop to a higher, better, or more advanced stage. Develop to a higher, better, or more advanced stage. I think that is precisely what we are going for, bettering ourselves, and by extension bettering our community. We are encouraged by our Beloved Community to be the best we can be, to reach our full potential. We are called by our faith to work toward justice and equity for all people. Everyone. No exceptions. Each of us has our own set of unique talents and skills, and together, we can support one another as we continue to effect positive change. Let's be frank, we could all stand to have some more positivity, a little bit more Love and Light in our lives. We need to be that Love, that Light.

Living our Principles requires sustained effort, and we as UU's are tasked with very crucial work. This work is not straightforward or simple; it varies from person to person, congregation to congregation. At its heart, it is an earnest desire to find and do something meaningful in this life, and to have people you love to share it with.

It starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with us.

