



## *Our UU Principles*

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*The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*

*Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;*

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*

*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*

*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

It should come as no surprise to even casual observers of the American political scene that there is an acute tension between fundamental political philosophies. This tension exists not only in American society, but in the

world's political scene as well. This tension is nothing new, it has existed in one form or other for thousands of years.

Before proceeding further, I would like to allay the concerns of anyone associated with the Internal Revenue Service who might be in the audience today. To channel my inner Richard Nixon, let me make one thing perfectly clear. In acknowledging the political tension of which I am about to speak, I borrow the words of Isaac Newton to say: "Hypotheses non fingo." That is to say, I make no hypothesis. For the purposes of this time to share, I neither endorse one side or the other; I encourage no person within this space to take a position. I merely state that this exists, and am doing so for illustrative purposes.

The purpose of politics is to decide how a society sets its priorities and allocates its resources. In this endeavor, the marketplace of ideas sees no shortage of schools of thought. On one end of the political spectrum, the emphasis is on the individual. In this perspective, it is the individual who ought to be able to self-govern to the greatest possible extent. The individual ought to be able to pursue life, liberty and happiness, along with his fortune, with as little restrictions set upon him by an external government. The phrases "every man for himself," "survival of the fittest" and "laissez faire" dominate this point of view. This ethos promotes the notion that the a person be able to keep the fruit of their labors within their own family and/or self-identified social group, and not be compelled by government to give up any part of his earnings for any purpose.

By contrast, the polar opposite of the political spectrum sees the philosophy that the individuals ought not only to subordinate themselves to the priorities set by the state, but should contribute a fair share of their earnings to support policies designed to promote the common welfare. Karl Marx's

slogan From “each according to his ability, to each according to his need” seems to best encapsulate the spirit of this ethos.

Needless to say, each of these ideologies has their ardent supporters and bitter critics.

How then, does the amateur political theorist (like me) reconcile these points of view? I myself have struggled with this conundrum most of my life. Reared as I was in a deeply conservative household where government was public enemy number one, taxation regarded as legalized theft, and the spirit of self-reliance and don't tread on me was seen as paramount, one could be forgiven for thinking my personal views would be in line with this mentality. Those who know me realize this not to be the case. My problem you see was that I was actually listening during the intense, immersive and all pervasive training I received in the Roman Catholic faith. In keeping with my innate skepticism, I tossed most of the precepts that well intentioned adults tried to foist upon me. Nevertheless, I was listening when the nuns told us about the parable of loaves and fishes.

A quick review is in order... Parable of the Loaves and Fishes: After a hard day of preaching and teaching, Jesus's apostles counselled him that it would be impolitic to send the faithful away hungry after giving him their undivided attention for the majority of the afternoon. Ever the pragmatic, Jesus saw the wisdom of this, and asked what food might be on hand. You know the rest of the story; a small amount of loaves and fishes somehow miraculously multiplied to feed the entire crowd to the point of satiety. Some theologians suggest the important takeaway from this parable is that God has provided a world for us that is more than capable of satisfying all of our needs, if we only recognize that fact, cooperate with one another, and share with one another. In other words, we are explicitly directed to take pains to include each other in the bounty of the earth, and when

necessary take care of one another by individual sacrifice of a little of what we have.

Neither the political indoctrination of the Moran household nor the rigorous instruction of Catholic theology provided me with all of the answers and practical guidelines that my soul, as well as my intellectual curiosity craved. Over the decades of my life, I have ping ponged back and forth between the extremes of rugged individual Libertarianism, and the socialistic ideal of a society created by individuals who place the common good above their own individual welfare. Surely, there was a way to break the conundrum, and provide a rational bridge between the extremes, but what was it?

In 1992, Betsy and I were married in a Unitarian Universalist church. In 1998, we finally made a commitment to join a community of seekers and found our spiritual home here at First Church UU in Leominster. I have been looking at our statement of Principles and Purposes (found on the insert in your order of service ☺) off and on since then. Like a mathematical theorem, the Principles and Purposes never fail to intrigue me, and never fail to give me another little sliver of insight into life's persistent questions every time I looked at them.

I invite you to ponder as well the very economical 81 words that are organized into 7 points.

The Principles start with the directive to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. The operative word in my opinion is "individual." The principles do not say that every individual is to be loved, or respected, honored, lionized, rationalized, criticized, defined, dismissed, disrespected... It doesn't distinguish between rugged individuals who take matters into their own hands, or those who demur to the collective will of a

give and take society. The Principles merely say respect the worth and dignity of the individual. As to the rest, well to put it bluntly, that is what we as persons of good conscience are left to figure out.

As we progress through the Principles, we see language in the second and third providing the goals of “Justice, equity and compassion in human relation,” as well as “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” These are laudable goals. These principles compel us to act in a certain way. Although we are not explicitly directed as in Matthew 22:36-40 to “love thy neighbor as thyself” we see in these goals the very seeds of love. That is to say, the pursuit of justice towards all of our fellow inhabitants of this earth is at its essence, nothing other than an act of love. As to encouragement of spiritual growth, one of the pinnacles of that growth could very well be the capability of holding two opposing ideas in one’s mind while not being discouraged by their apparently mutually exclusive nature. Instead we might recognize that there are merits even in ideas that wildly oppose one another.

Skipping ahead to fifth and sixth principles, "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large" and "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all" – here we see important constraints imposed by the Principles. In science the formulation of a physical theory is greatly aided by constraints. For example, a theory of gravity that violates the law of conservation of energy must be rejected. Constraints help us narrow the field of competing paradigms. By committing ourselves to the rights of conscience, we take away the possibility of riding roughshod over the views of others, simply because a particular opinion enjoys mere weight of numbers. The commitment to democratic process assures that everyone, regardless of the conventionality of their views has an opportunity to have their say. The goal of “world community with peace, liberty and justice for all” says so many things. For one, it rules out a great many misanthropic behaviors

which are inimical to the interests and wellbeing of those with whom we share this little blue planet.

Finally, we arrive at the seventh principle. I see this as a powerful and pervasive one. It demands: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." This principle reminds us of what should be obvious in our daily life, namely no one is an island. We all take part in this great enterprise called living. Virtually everything we do influences someone else somewhere. Every decision we take impacts the lives of our neighbors somehow. It may be big or small, negligible or important, but it happens. Those who embrace this principle understand that there are no true "rugged individuals" out there who are only charged with, and capable of taking care of their own needs. Sorry Libertarians, I hate to break the news to you, but the web of interdependent existence is like spacetime in physics. Matter warps spacetime. Warped spacetime tells matter how to move. The two are inextricably linked, just as we are to one another.

Now, returning to the fourth principle, you may well be wondering why this was skipped initially. The fourth principle, directing us to pursue "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" is the fulcrum upon which the other principles balance. In my estimation, the key word is "responsible." Of course we need free reign to search for truth, but that freedom ought to be tempered with responsibility. Responsibility in this context means that we are obligated to pursue truth to the places where the facts lead us. Facts quite often take us out of our comfort zone. Sometimes, they are even repulsive to us. That is precisely the time when we must follow them with the greatest focus and vigor. The world is a harsh place. Cruelty, irrationality, injustice, greed, avarice and ugliness lurk at every turn. Shutting our eyes to these things does not lead us to truth. We must weigh the good and the bad on the same scale. Even as we acknowledge that some points of view sicken us, we recognizing at the same time, these

viewpoints are held dear by individuals that our first principle directs us that to respect the worth and dignity of.

It would seem that this approach raises more questions than it provides answers for. Guess what, it does!!! That is what life is at its basic element; questions upon questions. To borrow Winston Churchill's description of the Soviet Union, life is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Nevertheless, these extraordinarily economical principles give us at least a framework for a rational attack on the problem. The rest is up to us. Along the way, we need to provide the brainpower, we need to provide the empathy, and we need to provide the compassion. Ultimately, we need to provide the love and the respect for our fellow human beings. Without these things, the Principles and Purposes are just words on paper. Then again, so would be the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, the Bhagavad Gita, and all of the other sacred writings mankind has created over the eons. Our principles and purposes may not be as verbose as other sacred texts, Unitarian Universalists are at least in good company, with other truth seekers world wide. We are just in the habit of saving the words for committee meetings. 😊