On Principle

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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Throughout the coming church year, I will be offering my reflections, and offering you the opportunity for reflection, on ways we might best express what is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith - what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist - individually, and together. There will be adult religious education classes on "Articulating Your Faith" and on "Spiritual Types." There will be sermons on unique new ways of symbolizing Unitarian Universalism, challenging ways of plumbing the depths of this complicated religion, through sociological studies and small discussion groups.

But today I kick off that work - the work of crystalizing just what we mean when we say "I'm a Unitarian Universalist" - by examining the words that are most commonly associated with our religious movement - that set of affirmations we call the "Seven Principles" of Unitarian Universalism.

I am continually struck - in congregational meetings, in Board retreats, in mid-day lunch conversations - by how frequently and how fervently we UU's cite our principles. Many of us truly do use them as a guide - in our ethical decisions, in our workplace, in our families and homes - as well as in this, our church community.

In the year that I have been your minister, I can't begin to count the number of occasions on which the principles have been mentioned as a source of inspiration for our individual, and collective, actions. They are often printed in our Sunday bulletin, and are regularly printed in our church newsletter. A framed copy hangs in the church office, and there's one in my office, too. Many of us even carry handy cards in our purse or wallet, a ready reference,

I hope, both for moments of personal doubt, and opportunities to educate others.

In my travels around the country, in my service within the UU movement at various levels, if there is one thing I have learned, it is this: there exists a fierce pride among Unitarian Universalists in the seven statements we call our Principles. As a group of religious seekers who often do not share a particular spiritual orientation or common theology, we need something to hang our hats on - and for many, the Principles serve just that purpose: they are a statement of the values that hold us together.

The curious thing about our collective enthusiasm for our Principles is that, although some of the concepts, and even a few of the phrases contained in them are part of a long-standing, historical tradition, the Principles as currently articulated are less than twenty years old. And therein lies perhaps one source of the pride we Unitarian Universalists take in our Principles - the fact that they are an open, evolving statement, subject to revision, to debate, even to being voted out altogether, since they are part of the bylaws that form our association of congregations. These are words truly owned by the people who profess them, not words formulated and handed down by some mysterious group of ancient bishops.

In that respect, they stand in stark contrast to the creeds of Christianity, the Moslem profession of faith, or other religious statements throughout the world. Ours is an evolving faith, and thus our Principles are intentionally flexible, always ready to reflect contemporary understandings of religion. I don't mean to claim that they are, or would be, easy to change - just ask our denominational president, Bill Sinkford, who recently initiated a minor controversy by suggesting that we might improve them a bit by adding a dose of what he calls "the language of reverence."

But that's a sermon topic for another morning. For now, suffice it to say that, in just one generation, Unitarian Universalists - people, mind you, who are adamantly non-creedal in their approach to religion - have developed a very strong, emotional identification with this particular set of words.

This was not always so. When a movement to revise the then-existing (and I might add, extremely bland) Statement of Purpose of the UUA began in earnest back in 1977 - began, in fact, with the development and passage of the Women and Religion Resolution at that summer's General Assembly -

the outcry, especially from old-guard, male ministers, was loud and long. Thus, the first full-blown attempt, in 1981, to alter the section of the UUA bylaws relating to our faith tradition had, as former UUA Moderator Denny Davidoff put it, died "without a prayer of passage."

But that initial effort did result in the formation of a UUA Board-sanctioned commission to draft what Rev. Kim Beach called "a strong statement of our principles - one with religious integrity, intellectual coherence, and literary quality."

Four years later, after often heated individual, congregational, and denominational debate - including the incorporation of three specific amendments to the wording that actually came from the floor of the General Assembly - the Seven Principles were officially adopted. And so, today - full of religious integrity, intellectual coherence, and literary quality - those principles stand as our statement of shared beliefs.

And, as our denomination's leading religious educator, Sophia Fahs, always reminded us, it matters what we believe. So let's take a look at the Seven Principles, the words that offer - for now, for our time - the foundation of our faith as Unitarian Universalists.

Taken as a whole, we notice within them a sense of progression, a moving outward, in an ever-widening circle, from a reaffirmation of our historic emphasis on the independence and integrity of the individual, to finish with a soaring sweep of universality in the cosmic "interdependent web." In the very middle, the fourth principle upholds our traditional insistence on the search for religious truth, as we can know it.

Taken separately, the Principles offer a rich repository of meaning for individual Unitarian Universalists. Each UU seems to have his or her own favorite - the principle that guides their action in the world, or the principle that initially attracted them to our movement, the one that resounds with a "Yes! That's exactly what I believe!"

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Now let's take a closer look, beginning with the first principle: respect for "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." This first principle is the touchstone of our tradition; it not only provides the philosophical

underpinning for our unfinished work toward achieving gender equity, our advocacy for the right of gays and lesbians to marry and form families, our ongoing struggle against all forms of racism - but this first principle also serves as a beautiful summation of the doctrine of Universalism, which insisted that all persons - sinners and saints alike - were equal in God's love. It is, perhaps, our most frequently cited principle, for it calls us to treat one another with respect, prophetically reminding us that each of our fellow human beings is just as valuable, just as important, as we ourselves are.

Yet this first principle can be a double-edged sword. Too often in our Unitarian Universalist churches, the rights of the individual are allowed to jeopardize the common welfare of the community. Such is the delicate balancing act that all democracies are faced with - and our congregations are no exception. Although it is true that, in our tradition, each person is the final arbiter of his or her own religious beliefs, we need to remember also that there will be times when our community must take precedence.

That is why the remaining six principles address, in one form or another, the community.

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Our second principle refers to "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." Here we incorporate our long history of social advocacy, from abolitionists like Theodore Parker to suffragists like Susan B. Anthony, from the compassion of Clara Barton to the civil rights activism of James Reeb. But despite our heritage of progressive leadership, we cannot - and are not - resting on our laurels.

These days, our Association's work for justice finds us, among other things, at the forefront of the movement to recognize the rights of the gay and lesbian community; we are one of the few denominations to ordain openly gay ministers, and most of our clergy - myself included - routinely perform wedding ceremonies for committed same-sex couples.

These days, our work for equity finds us, among other things, continuing the fight for equal pay for women, and promoting a policy whose goal is to create an "anti-racist" Unitarian Universalist Association. It sees us beginning to take a good, hard - and painful - look at the structures of class division in our society, and within our own churches.

These days, our compassion is moving individual Unitarian Universalists to work for the abolition of the death penalty, for causes such as the Patient's Bill of Rights and death with dignity, for improved working conditions for third-world laborers. It finds us volunteering in homeless shelters and work camps, rape crisis centers and flood relief programs.

Our second principle, in short, is both the tradition of social activism in which we stand, and the driving force behind our hope for making a better future - for everyone.

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The third principle asks us to "accept one another," wherever we may be on our religious path, and to "encourage spiritual growth in our congregations." It is the principle that most directly cites the human need for spirituality, and, therefore, is one that I believe bears deeper examination - for there are two concepts contained in this principle: acceptance and encouragement. And as Carolyn Owen-Towle, former candidate for president of the UUA, has pointed out, "If acceptance affirms us as we are, encouragement pushes us toward whom we might become. As crucial as acceptance is to our spiritual and emotional health, we need frequent nudges by others to grow, lest we stagnate. Our religious community helps us grow beyond ourselves."

This third principle is taking on increasing significance in the Unitarian Universalist movement as we develop a deeper sense of collective spirituality. UU's, long hesitant to take on any of the trappings of more traditional religion, are once again beginning to explore what it means to be spiritual beings - and the more we explore, the more religiously pluralistic we become. Unitarian Universalist Jews, agnostics, mystics, Buddhists, Christians, Taoists (the list goes on and on) - each is not only to be accepted and welcomed on our shared religious journey, but is to be encouraged in her or his chosen faith - whether or not those beliefs coincide with our own. That is the power of the third principle.

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Our fourth - and as I pointed out earlier - central, principle reminds us that ours must be "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Most definitions of Unitarian Universalism include some variation on the idea that

we are seekers, people who do not claim to have found religious answers, but rather who - together - profess to be looking for them. Asking questions. Testing. Reconsidering. Always open to new insights. One of the early rallying cries of the Unitarians in Eastern Europe was the claim that "revelation is not sealed." Truth is not, once and for all, contained in any single scripture or doctrine, but rather is always unfolding - if only we have the eyes to see.

The fourth principle indicates that our search for truth and meaning should be both free and responsible. Free from the constraints of religious orthodoxy or ecclesiastical authority. But at the same time responsible - not engaged in a scattershot search that disrespects communities and traditions, not pursuing an irrational, pie-in-the-sky fantasy - but rather an ethically based, thoughtful, careful (and continuing) consideration of the deepest questions of life. By insisting on both freedom and responsibility, we seek to maintain balance. According to Fred Muir, "Lessons are [certainly] learned from tradition, leadership, and the world's sacred scriptures, as well as from life's experiences - but eventually we each provide [the] balance to our search. We give [the] direction to our lives... Human experience is the final authority [in Unitarian Universalism]."

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While concepts like freedom and responsibility hint at UUism's deep roots in the European Enlightenment, our fifth and sixth principles connect us more concretely with that heritage, and at the same time with the uniquely American incarnation of those political ideals. Once again, in the wording of these two principles, we have a sense of movement outward, from the individual, to our congregations, to the broader world. Here, we affirm both the "right of conscience" of the individual Unitarian Universalist, as well as the "use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," while aspiring toward a "world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all."

One of our generation's most eloquent spokespersons for free religion, Earl Holt, writes, "It is the elevation of individual conscience to the primary category of religious authority that has been the uniquely distinguishing characteristic of liberal religious theology."

Holt - who currently serves as chair of our denominational Commission on Appraisal, an elected committee which is preparing a study of the very principles and spiritual glue that holds us together - goes on to say, "The purpose of life from this perspective is the opportunity it presents to grow a soul - to gradually unfold the moral and religious forces within us, employing all the resources at our disposal. We believe that the individual conscience is the only legitimate source of religious authority, and that the purpose of the church is to grow and nurture [that] individual conscience."

From this base of personal religious autonomy, however, the fifth and sixth principles inspire us - in community, in covenantal relationship - to create, in our congregations, models for society, for the appropriate use of democracy, of power, of discussion and debate. One of my favorite colleagues and one of our most articulate modern prophets, Rosemary Bray McNatt, wrote in a recent issue of the UU World, "If ever there were a principle deserving of our focused attention in [our time], it would be the Fifth … [for] though the democratic process may be alive and well in our congregations, it is in serious peril elsewhere - and not just in countries far away, but in our own."

And so we remain vigilant, remain concerned - and remain active. It is our sixth principle that calls us into action. Any discussion of our sixth principle, however brief, would not be complete without mention of the various arms of our Unitarian Universalist Association that are dedicated to fostering "peace, liberty and justice" throughout the world. The UU Service Committee - which this congregation supports each winter with our Guest at Your Table collections - has worldwide programs ranging from helping to improve the standard of living for villagers in remote areas of Africa, to assisting inner city youth in North America. Its original purpose was to aid Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation of Europe.

Another of our projects, the UU United Nations Office, is one of the few officially sanctioned "non-governmental" organizations working within the U.N. for the goal of a safer, more peaceful world community. In addition, there's our Holdeen India Project, an ongoing series of grants designed specifically to "benefit the people of India" through a variety of humanitarian and development programs.

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And so, we have moved from individual worth, dignity and freedom, to the global community. Our seventh and final principle takes this progression to its logical, and ultimate, conclusion - encompassing all of the natural universe. Borrowing language from Native American Chief Seattle, the seventh principle calls on us to respect "the interdependent web of existence" - and reminds us that we are but a tiny part of that web.

To my mind, our seventh principle serves as a perfect frame, completing the picture begun with the first principle. It comes as no surprise that together, these two principles, the first and the last, are the most oft-quoted statements of Unitarian Universalist belief.

Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that our seventh principle expresses the core of the religious faith of many Unitarian Universalists. David Bumbaugh, a professor at the UU seminary in Chicago, notes that the Seventh Principle is "the one part of our principles that wasn't [controversial] across the continent, wasn't hammered out in a long and exhaustive process. [Instead, it was] accepted virtually without debate. And yet," he says, "it is the principle best known among us, and most enthusiastically embraced … The seventh principle is our [unique] contribution to religious [dialogue]."

Through it, we acknowledge - we Unitarian Universalists who are so fiercely independent - we acknowledge our interdependence, our profound connection with other people, other creatures, the natural environment. Our seventh and ultimate principle, in effect, puts us in our place - as a natural part of the world, not as the crown of creation.

Rev. Barbara Merritt calls the seventh principle more than just "a self-evident proposition about the space we occupy in the world. It is a religious statement," she says, "one that necessitates certain fundamental spiritual truths and disciplines." Among these, Merritt suggests, are humility, compassion, and reverence.

What a transformed world this would be if, inspired by our seventh principle - inspired by all seven of our principles - we could but develop those three qualities in our lives: humility, compassion, and reverence…

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May our Unitarian Universalist Principles - as we now know them, as we may come to know them in the future - continue to illuminate both our individual religious paths, and our common struggles of faith and hope.

May they call us to live lives that reflect our deep yearning for justice, for wholeness, for independence and interdependence.

And may we always seek the rich promise of our faith - now, and as it evolves in the generations to come.

Amen.