

The Keystone

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Aug. 6, 2006
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

I have titled my reflection this morning, “The Keystone” – referring to the position and importance we give to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” in our Unitarian Universalist tradition. You will find a visual representation of this idea on the back of the announcements page in your bulletin. If you’ll take that picture out for a moment, I want to comment on a few features of our seven UU principles. You will notice that the first and last principles form pillars that support an arch. This summer, while in St. Louis for the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, I visited the renowned arch on the banks of the Mississippi River – the arch that marks the “Gateway to the West.” What a remarkable feat of engineering! What a majestic testament to the human spirit, soaring toward the heavens with little visible means of structural support. The base – the part of the arch that is in contact with the ground – provides one means by which the arch is able to reach upward. In the case of our Unitarian Universalist principles, the base – the “pillars,” as I am calling them – are the two affirmations most widely known and commonly cited among us: Our first principle, the Universalist understanding of human nature as having inherent worth and dignity, the notion that the Creator loves each and every individual, equally, and unconditionally – is balanced on the other end by our seventh principle, the Unitarian understanding of the universe as one great unity, a complete, interconnected whole. These two principles reflect our most deeply held Unitarian Universalist beliefs about humanity and the cosmos – and they serve to ground us, providing a foundation on which we can build our other principles. The remaining five principles, in one way or another, each address how we are to be in relation to one another. Rather than religious affirmations like the first and last principles, these statements serve as ideals to guide us as we interact with one another, and – together –

seek to build congregations, and communities, that will reflect the values we hold dear. Now take another look at the drawing in your bulletin. The principle we are highlighting today – the fourth principle – is at the very top of the picture. It holds the position known in architecture as the keystone. Even with a strong base, even with two good pillars, an arch cannot ultimately stand without this stone, the keystone, which connects the two sides, holds them aloft, and literally provides the support – that mysterious, invisible structural support I mentioned a moment ago when I referred to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The keystone is, in architectural terms, the most important piece of the puzzle when it comes to building an arch. Without it, the whole thing would simply collapse. Similarly, I would argue, in our Unitarian Universalist principles, as depicted in this drawing, it is the fourth principle that holds everything else together, for without it, we could not be with one another, in covenant – not in our congregations, and not in the world in which we live. Our fourth principle refers to a way of life that is both free and responsible. Most people today who attend churches or synagogues, mosques or temples in our increasingly secular society – do so because they seek some kind of deeper understanding of the meaning of their lives. Most UU's – including most of us – are here, rather than somewhere else, because we have found that we are only willing to seek our Truth in a context of religious freedom – freedom for ourselves, and freedom for others. Though our searches for truth and meaning are often very personal, and quite private, nonetheless we have discovered, and have chosen to join, a community of fellow seekers – a community that is based on freedom of belief. At Heritage, we are free to seek the religious truths that resonate in our own hearts. We are free from creeds and dogmas that would assert that this or that path is the only right way. We are free to grow and explore and change as we develop as human, spiritual beings. Indeed, the sense of religious freedom in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is sometimes a very heady experience – particularly for those who are newer to our faith. Let me read you an email I received a couple of years ago from a first-time visitor: “I loved your church, your service, your congregation – everything about HUUC! I was awed by the broad range of influences present during the service. It blew my mind: The Beatles? Starhawk! Teilhard de Chardin, the Bhagavad-Gita and “The Color Purple”?? I [just] had to pinch myself...” Yes – when you stop to think about it, there's a remarkable amount of freedom available to us here, as we explore, together, religiously. But I share this visitor's comments with you this morning not so that we might pat ourselves on the back, not to extol the virtues of our open and inclusive approach to the religious life – but rather I share this particular

story because does not have a happy ending, as least not for us. You see, I don't know where (if anywhere at all) that visitor now attends church. She only came to Heritage for about a month or so – this despite the fact that, elsewhere in her email, she writes, “I am so spiritually eclectic that I [have] never really fit [in] anywhere – yet I fit here! ... I [am] amazed at the sense of ‘coming home’.” I can't tell you why this particular visitor stopped coming – only a few weeks after writing those words – but I suspect is has something to do with the other half of the equation contained in our fourth principle. Yes, our way of being in religious community emphasizes the autonomy of each individual on his or her own spiritual path – but we are reminded, also, that the search must be responsible. The keystone balances our freedom with responsibility – the responsibility of making a true commitment to this community. Michael Durall, whom I quoted earlier this morning and whose ideas the Board of Trustees will be grappling with this coming weekend at their retreat, puts it this way in his provocative and controversial new book, *The Almost Church*: “With [our] Unitarian Universalist insistence on freedom of the individual, ‘commitment to the church’ and ‘leading meaningful spiritual lives’ are not phrases often heard in UU churches.” I want Heritage to be a church where those phrases are heard – and often. I want us to be a place where concepts like making a deep commitment to the church and leading meaningful spiritual lives are lifted up in the orientation classes we offer, and in the new Path to Membership program we will be starting here this fall. I want us to be a place also where long-term members are constantly re-examining their own commitment to the church, and seeking new ways to lead meaningful spiritual lives. In short, I want Heritage to be a church where those who enjoy its many freedoms also understand and share in its responsibilities. A church where we, in Durall's words, “raise the expectations of membership.” Where being a member is something important – and where the responsibilities of membership are also important. Durall offers an example from the membership liturgy of one church that I think is simply beautiful. “Here, you will be cared for,” that church says in its new member ceremony, “but here you will also be called upon to care for others.” This is the responsible part of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are responsible for those with whom we share the journey. Not only that – not only are we responsible to care for one another – we are responsible, too, to care for our church itself. Today, statistics reveal, far too many Unitarian Universalist churches are, at best, in a holding pattern, while many are in decline – precisely because our individual freedom has been allowed to overshadow our collective responsibility – to one another, and to our congregations. The

healthy and growing churches among us – and Heritage should be one of these – are the ones, says Durall, in which members are expected to (1) attend worship services regularly, (2) participate in something outside of worship that feeds their own spirit – be that a discussion group or book club, choir rehearsal or yoga, and (3) participate in something outside of worship that serves others. In other words, to engage in both a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Just this past week, two of our members have lost parents. Others in our community have been there for them – bringing over food, sending flowers to the funeral home, providing a hug and a shoulder to cry on, or a sympathetic ear at the other end of the phone. This is just one of the many ways in which we live out the responsibilities of being a part of this church community. There are many others: After church today, those committed folks who oversee the stewardship and financial well-being of this institution will be meeting – and believe me, they could use a few more committed folks. Next weekend, those members who give of their time and talents to the religious education of our children will gather to begin preparations for the coming year of Sunday School – and again, believe me – they could use a few more committed folks. In a couple of weeks, Clay will be convening the 2006-2007 version of our HUUC Choir. The spirit and the energy inherent in that group is always contagious – and I encourage you to consider joining. This is but a brief and incomplete snapshot of the life of this congregation – a vibrant institution that can become even more meaningful, in all of our lives, during the coming year, if we each make a commitment to a spiritual search that is not only free, but also responsible. Let me take a moment now in closing – for one can hardly stand in a pulpit this week without addressing it . . . I want to comment on the situation beyond these safe sanctuary walls. Today we have prayed for peace; we have sung for peace. We come to this place keenly aware that, while we enjoy a freedom of belief here in our little corner of the world, that most in the world can only imagine – all around us culture wars and religious wars are raging. It seems, sometimes, as if entire peoples and nations would have their own religious freedom at any cost – even the forceful elimination of anyone whose path differs from theirs. This is freedom without responsibility, writ large. Has the world gone mad? Where is the sense of human brotherhood and sisterhood, where is the commitment to the greater good, in these days? Innocent children, women and men are bombed as they go to school or work. Phrases like “human shields” become part of our common vocabulary. The Party of God is at war with God’s Chosen People. Shiites and Sunnis are fighting a civil (or, more accurately, civil/religious) war. Holy lands become killing fields. And we – we cannot turn our heads

and look the other way. Part of the responsibility of our free faith is the calling to serve others – not only in our congregation, but out there, where the suffering is so great. What can we do to help the world step back from the precipice? How can we model for others a way of living that embraces, rather than rejects or seeks to destroy, religious diversity? Where might our Unitarian Universalist principles – those principles depicted on that drawing of the arch: a belief in the value and worth of each individual, a belief in the power of loving connection that holds us all together, and, yes, the keystone – a spiritual search that is both free and responsible – where might we be able to share those principles in the world – that it might be made more whole? These are the questions I want you to ponder this morning, and this week. Where might you, and I – each of us – help to create more peace? May we search for that place in freedom and responsibility – may we find it – and may we do good and peaceful work there. May it be so. Namaste. And amen.